A Witch's Legacy

Hesketh Bell

A WITCH'S LEGACY.

BY

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CHAPTER I.

THE carriage drove away and Violet turned to her mother. "What could Mrs. Nettley mean, mother? She whispered in my ear just after she kissed me, 'Consider well your answer, my dear girl, and God bless you.'"

The moment Violet asked the question she felt how useless a one it was, and how well she herself could have answered it without her mother's assistance. In an instant she guessed intuitively the object of Mrs. Nettley's visit to Belvoir, and the poor girl heaved a deep sigh at the thought that her trials were far from being at an end, and that all the ground she knew so well was to be gone over once more with Heaven knows what fresh arguments

on Mrs. Lee's part, and what further insinuations and innuendoes against Jack, his motives and character.

It had to be gone through, and the sooner the better, so giving her arm to her mother, she led her back into the verandah and prepared herself to pass one more of those unhappy half hours which gave her so much pain.

Mrs. Lee settled herself wearily in her long chair, and begged Violet to draw down some of the red and white blinds which hung round the verandah, so as to shelter her from the brightness of the afternoon sun, which was just beginning to light up the black and white marble flags of the broad piazza with vivid dashes of glaring light.

"Now sit here close to me, Violet, for I have something most important to tell you, dear." Mrs. Lee spoke in a very weak, low voice, and Violet could not help being painfully struck by her mother's fragile appearance. Mrs. Lee could, however, have spoken in a much louder voice without any danger to her health, if she had so cared, but she considered that a

little extra weakness and fragility might do her case no harm, and it suited her purpose that day to appear much more weak and ill than she would ever have cared to be. Violet noticed too, with dread, that her mother's pocket-handkerchief was well *en évidence*, and everything tended to show that Mrs. Lee was about to make a last grand decisive attack on Violet's defences, and that tears, entreaties, prayers, and supplications had been prepared to reduce, once for all, her opposition to the plans and projects which had been so well mapped out.

Mrs. Lee, this time, opened fire with what generally came on later in the scene. Her tears began to flow gently, at once.

"My darling Violet, I do hope you thoroughly believe that I should miss you terribly if you were to leave me, but, of course, as it would be for your own good and happiness, it is my duty, as a mother, not to think of my own comfort or convenience, but to sink all personal considerations in the necessary steps to be taken to ensure the permanent happiness and welfare of my children."

To this pretty little maternal sentiment Violet could find nothing more suitable to answer than a simple "Yes, mother."

Mrs. Lee evidently did not expect anything else, for she continued almost immediately:

"I don't think you could have been very well last night, when we were coming home from Government House. Probably you had a headache, dear, and the heat of the day had been too great for you, so that I don't think I need refer to the somewhat unkind little speeches you made to me during the drive."

Try as she might Violet could not have recalled to mind anything she had said which might have wounded her mother's feelings; nor, indeed, could Mrs. Lee have done so, but then it suited that good lady to begin operations in this way, as all these unnecessary little phrases gave her time to think over what she ought to say next. As Violet, however, remained silent, she was forced to continue. She first drew attention to that dreadful letter from the attorney, and tearfully read over again the part which warned her to prepare

for an early departure from the estate ; she then drew a harrowing picture of all the miseries that they would have to endure when battling with the direst poverty, how they would have to live in some wretched little cottage, somewhere or other, certainly out of Grenadilla, for Mrs. Lee could not bear the thought of her poverty being witnessed by all the old associates, over whom she had affected a certain superiority. Then Mrs. Lee tearfully wondered what would become of her poor crippled child, who was almost completely bedridden, and whose sole pleasures consisted of a quiet drive, now and then, when the weather was not too warm. She would certainly never survive their eviction from Belvoir. In a weak voice she then went on to declare that her own personal feelings were a secondary consideration ; her health had lately become so dreadfully delicate that she was sure that she would not long survive the terrible reverse that was coming upon them, and yet the thought of leaving her children entirely unprovided for and unprotected made her look upon the idea of death as intolerable.

The poor woman was certainly gifted with considerable talent for presenting a graphic description of woeful misfortune, and she did not spare Violet a single harrowing detail of the misery which would so soon be their portion. There was something so inexpressibly dismal in the weak monotonous sound of Mrs. Lee's voice as she described all these dreadful probabilities, that Violet soon found herself almost as much affected by the thought of them as her mother was, and a feeling of blank despair rapidly gained possession of her. The sun, too, which had been shining so brightly all the morning, had now disappeared behind an impenetrable bank of dark grey clouds, and the life and joyous brightness of everything seemed to have suddenly vanished, leaving a dismal veil of shadow and gloom over every flower and leaf which in the sunlight had looked so bright and gay. The rain was just beginning to fall, and the monotonous patter of the heavy drops, as they fell on the broad leaves of the spreading aloes, made a fitting accompaniment to the general depression. The merry little humming-birds had

vanished, and only a solitary grey sparrow now remained perched on the branch of a rose tree, ruffling his feathers as the raindrops fell upon him, and now and then uttering a plaintive little cry, as if he too had been ruthlessly expelled from some cosy nest which he had been so fond of.

Poor Mrs. Lee wept bitterly, but was secretly much pleased to see that her daughter's eyes were also brimming over with hardly repressed tears. A great point had been gained. Violet was evidently softened and appalled by the dismal picture of woe which Mrs. Lee had so skilfully depicted. The good lady was acting on the principle followed by advertisers of patent medicines, who bid you first look on this picture and then on that, and, having presented what she considered a sufficiently heart-rending picture of their situation when the estate would be taken away from them, she thought the propitious moment had now arrived for the representation of the other side of the picture.

By a very easy transition, and almost before Violet had noticed it, Mrs. Lee was now referring to the only possible remedy

for their desperate position. She most carefully refrained from putting the matter in anything like a mercenary light, and with exquisite tact and feeling she related to Violet the object of Mrs. Nettley's visit to her that morning. She drew a delightfully romantic picture of poor Joseph Nettley consuming his aching heart in silence and solitude with burning love for Violet. Dear old Mrs. Nettley herself could not have related with more feeling and motherly love the unhappy condition of the young man's mind, nor could she have found any more graceful excuses to account for poor Joseph's desperate timidity and shyness.

"But, mother dear, I don't love him. How could I take advantage of what is possibly only a temporary infatuation, and marry him simply from motives of interest? In all probability when he sees that his love is not returned, he will get over all this, and in a few months will marry some nice girl who will love him with all her heart and make him as happy as he deserves to be."

"Temporary infatuation, Violet? Non-

sense, you know it is no such thing!" sharply retorted Mrs. Lee, who was beginning to fear that she was after all again doomed to another failure. "That dear fellow will love but once only, and I cannot think how you can calmly allow him to ruin his life by refusing the honour he is doing you in proposing for your hand. There is not a single thing against him in any way; you confess that you like him, and I can't believe that you can be seriously thinking of any one else." And here Mrs. Lee sniffed tearfully, but with marked disdain.

Violet knew well to whom her mother referred, but declined to take notice of the challenge.

"I have no patience with you, Violet!" Mrs. Lee continued. "All silly girls of your age have absurd notions about love and nonsense of that sort, and imagine that one cannot marry a man without being in love with him—absurd! Love most often comes after marriage, my child, and I do hope you won't cherish any of those ridiculous ideas. Why, when I married your poor father, I did not care for him

half as much as you even do for Mr. Nettley, and I am sure no couple could have been happier than we were." And Mrs. Lee's tears flowed afresh at this reminiscence of connubial bliss.

Violet, however, small as she was when she had left her parents, still distinctly remembered certain little episodes in their married life which she knew now had been characterised by peevishness and jealousy on Mrs. Lee's part, and coldness and indifference on her father's.

Mrs. Lee returned once more to the charge, and finally ended by supplicating Violet, almost on her bended knees, to let her give Mrs. Nettley a favourable answer. This painful scene cut Violet to the heart, and the poor girl was utterly wretched. Although Mrs. Lee had not said, in so many words, that Nettley had offered to set all her anxieties at rest with regard to the estate, if only her daughter would marry him, still Violet easily gathered from what her mother said that such was the case, and her mind was distracted by the dreadful predicament she was in.

"Give me time, mother—just a little

time," was all she could say, as she raised the weeping woman back into her chair and embraced her affectionately. "I can't think over all this now, dear one; it is too serious—too dreadful, and I am afraid. Give me till to-morrow,"—and, once more kissing her mother's careworn forehead, she hurried away to the seclusion of her bedroom, where she might unrestrainedly unravel all her conflicting thoughts and emotions.

The struggle was desperately hard, and Violet spent the greater part of that night in trying to make up her mind to follow the course which she was now beginning to think was the one which she was in duty bound to take. She did not seek to hide the truth from herself now, and several times during the long hours of that painful night did she openly confess to her aching heart that she loved Jack more than she thought she could ever love any one else. But, on the other hand, she felt that she would not be acting rightly in sacrificing the comfort and possibly the lives of her mother and sister to the selfish gratification of a passion which might very possibly be

misplaced. She reminded herself over and over again that there was no tie whatever between her and Jack, and that during that memorable ride he had perhaps been carried away by the impulse of the moment to say more than he would have said in a calmer spirit. Surely, if he did love her truly, he would have written a word to her before his sudden departure, telling her of the trouble into which he had fallen, or of the cause of his sudden disappearance. Two little short lines would have been quite sufficient; and Violet could not conceal from herself that if only that little confirmation of the truth of Jack's love had been forthcoming, not even all the terrors of their approaching troubles would have been sufficient to prevent her remaining true to the absent one. Matters stood differently now though, and she was bound to acknowledge that the path of duty certainly led in the direction which Mrs. Lee was never weary of depicting as covered with roses and delight.

Possibly Jack was far away and never intended to return to Grenadilla; indeed, for all she knew, he might even then, as

Mrs. Lee expressed it, be "philandering" with some other girl and have forgotten all about her. Ought she then to sacrifice everything for the sake of this shadow, even though that shadow should be wrapped up in all the happiness which her life could contain? Violet felt that every one would consider her conduct unnatural in the extreme; and she could not but confess that although Joseph Nettley was by no means brilliant or accomplished, he was undoubtedly a thorough gentleman and full of sterling good qualities. Marriage with him would mean health and happiness to her mother, and most probably a quiet, comfortable hum-drum sort of existence for herself. She was sure that she would never love Joseph in the same manner as she loved Jack; but then, as her mother so often repeated, love was not everything that was needed to make a happy marriage. After hours of sad thoughts, tears, and unhappy reflections, Violet at last fell asleep, making heroic resolves henceforth to shut out for ever from her heart that frequently recurring image of Jack.

It was quite late the next morning before Violet felt that she had nerved herself sufficiently to be able to tell her mother that she had at last arrived at a decision, and when she left her bedroom she was exceedingly relieved though surprised to hear that Mrs. Lee had taken the carriage and had gone to Williamtown. Knowing that her mother always took her breakfast in bed and was hardly ever visible before midday, Violet was much surprised, and she wondered what could be the cause of this extraordinary step. Thinking that Mrs. Lee might have mentioned the reason of her journey to her sister, Violet hurried to the room which the poor deformed girl so seldom left, and after the usual morning embrace, asked her if she knew why their mother had gone to Williamtown so early.

"I'm sure I don't know, Violet," peevishly answered Charlotte. "Poor mother is so worried and bothered just now that she does not seem to know quite what she is doing; she does nothing but cry all day long, and she has enough to make her miserable, I'm sure. It's really too bad, when so little is required to make every-

thing right. Eugh! The selfishness of some people is simply disgusting!" and the unfortunate girl painfully turned her poor twisted body towards the wall.

Charlotte Lee's mind and temper had become soured and crabbed under her dreadful affliction, and the dreary long days which the poor child had spent all her life, stretched on a bed of almost continual pain, had never been cheered by the consolations which a more resigned spirit might have afforded. Life had, indeed, been dismal and pleasureless to the unfortunate girl; her temper and disposition seem to have lost all natural sweetness, and the poor child took a morbid pleasure in repining at her dreary lot, and in comparing her unhappy condition with that of all the healthy young girls who came now and then to try and cheer her dismal solitude.

The only person for whom she seemed to show the slightest affection was her mother, and Mrs. Lee repaid it by the most unremitting love and care. To her sister she appeared to have taken a positive dislike, and never having seen her until a few

months previous to the opening of this story, she looked upon her as an interloper, and sincerely shared her mother's hopes with regard to the ultimate advantages they might derive from the brilliant marriage which Violet ought to make.

Violet, not caring to notice her sister's disagreeable speech, made no answer to it. Charlotte, however, was in one of her worst moods, and continued spitefully—

"It's simply ridiculous—the way you are going on, you know, Violet. I know all about it—you are simply flattering yourself that that Moresby cares about you; utter nonsense—I'm——"

"Please don't go on in that way, Charlotte; you are quite wrong," broke in Violet.

"Quite wrong—oh, yes, I dare say," continued the crippled girl, laughing in an aggravating manner. "Oh! but I know more about it than you think; you don't know what he said about you to May Elves, at tennis, just before he went away—he——"

"Be quiet, Charlotte," interrupted Violet; "I don't wish to know anything of what

Mr. Moresby said, I can't think how you can talk like that."

"Oh, but I will; he told May Elves that he thought your chin was quite crooked and that the colour on your cheeks was a great deal too beautiful to be natural, and that——"

"Charlotte, how can you tell such untruths?" broke in Violet, who did not believe a word of the story, but, girl-like, could not help feeling somewhat annoyed. "You know very well that what you are saying is utterly false, and, besides, I don't care if it be true. It doesn't make the slightest difference to me. However, if you and mother think you are going to make me marry any one by continually making all sorts of insinuations and unjust remarks about Jack Moresby, you are both very much mistaken."

Violet could not trust herself to say more, and hurriedly left her sister's room, feeling very vexed and annoyed at having been led to say even as much as she had. She was sure that the little story about her chin and complexion had been concocted by her sister, or probably by Miss May Elves. Never-

theless it annoyed her. Jack was still her hero, and she would not have her faith in him shaken even by such absurd malicious stories. Taking her hat and sunshade, she walked away down towards the mill-yard, and in order to divert her thoughts, resolved to go and see how some of her old sick people were getting on.

It was a beautiful morning, and the heavy rain which had fallen during the night had cooled the air and made walking very pleasant. Violet resolved to go a little farther than usual, and look up a poor old woman whom she had not seen for some time.

When, after a few minutes' walk, she arrived at her destination, she was quite surprised to note the almost complete transformation which the old woman's house had undergone since her last visit. A few weeks before it had been the picture of misery ; the crumbling mud walls had kept out neither wind nor rain, the rotten thatch of the roof in many places had fallen in, leaving the interior unsheltered, while the wretched doors and hinges had either entirely disappeared or else hung all awry.

The hut had been an utter ruin in fact. The infirm old negro woman who owned it had sunk to the lowest depths of poverty through the sudden death of her only son, killed some months before in an accident at the mill-yard of a neighbouring plantation. Although the old woman's hut was not situated on her mother's estate, Violet, having heard of the poor creature's unfortunate condition, had been in the habit of going to see her, and while bringing her now and then small quantities of food and comforts, had at the same time bitterly bewailed her inability to have something done towards putting the wretched hut in a more habitable condition.

Her surprise was accordingly great on seeing the pleasing transformation which had been effected in the exterior of the cottage. The rotten mud walls had been neatly plastered and white-washed, while the broken-down thatch had been replaced by a nice shingled roof, perfectly weather-tight and comfortable. Violet could hardly recognise the place, and on being admitted by the old woman, was delighted to find that the inside of the cottage had also been

attended to, and that it was looking quite cosy.

"Well, Mother Hannah, I'm delighted to see such a change for the better in your little house. How have you managed it? Some good fairy must have been at work for you."

"Ah, Missy Violet, I bin too glad to see you, me dearie, for true; it bin quite long time since you come see old Hannah, and she lub you too much—true—true," mumbled the old woman as she dusted a chair for her visitor. "Ah, yes, missy—good fairy bin here for sartin, and de good God must be sent him to me just right time, for all de thatch 'most blow away by great storm last month, and I sleep in de rain all night."

"And who is the good fairy, Hannah? It can't be our manager, for I heard him tell my mother that our own cottages were in a dreadful state, and that it was quite impossible to do anything at all towards repairing, so long as sugar remained so low."

"No, missy, it no be you manager, tho' he be good man too, but it be some one who

know you well, Missy Violet. He come here two time, dis last fortn't, and he sit here and he chat to me all about you, missy; he make me talk and talk and tell him all 'bout how you be so good and pretty and charitable, and how you comes and sees us poor old naygurs and brings us nice little sweet things, and all dat."

Violet guessed at once who the good fairy had been, and she could not repress an almost tender feeling for the kind-hearted fellow who did such good actions so unostentatiously. She could not but be touched by such devotion as his, and Nettley would have been delighted beyond measure if he could have known how much he had grown in Violet's estimation.

"Ah, Missy Violet," continued old Hannah, "Massa Nettley too good — too good; he pass here riding 'bout one month gone, an he see how de rain fall in my old bit of house. He just tell me 'how d'ye' and nothin' more. Nex' day two masons an' one carpinter come, and in three day time dey make me dis beautiful little house." And the old woman pointed out with great pride to Violet how clean and

dry the walls were, and how solid the roof. Even the inside had been looked after, and a cheerful little blue-flowered paper brightened up the little room.

"But dat no be all he do, dear missy," the old woman went on. "He do some ting for old Mammy Sampson and for old Cæsar Jacob; he give 'em all good little house, all same like dis. Ah! he be too good young man, for true! He tell me he wish he could help all de old people you goes and sees, Miss Violet, but he say most of dem live on Mrs. Lee's plantation, and so he can't interfere wid dem. Ah, me dear missy, I sure dat young man lub you too much."

"That's all right, Hannah," interrupted Violet, who was far from inclined to talk over Mr. Nettley's sentiments with the old woman. "I'm delighted to see such an improvement in your condition, but can't stop to chat any more to-day as the sun is getting too hot, and I must get back home," and nodding a cheery farewell to the old woman, Violet wended her way back to the house.

As she walked slowly along the solitary

cane traces, she could not help thinking very kindly of Joseph Nettley, and the prospect of all the help which she would now be able to give to all the poor old souls in whom she interested herself, made her look almost with a feeling of complacency on the step which she was about to take. The remembrance of Jack, on the other hand, often persisted in forcing itself into her thoughts, but though the effort cost her much, Violet bravely resolved to put all those recollections which were so dear to her, resolutely out of her heart, and to do her best to prepare for the irrevocable course, to which she was trying so hard to reconcile herself.

When she reached the house, she noticed that the horses were being taken out of the carriage. Mrs. Lee had evidently returned from Williamtown, and Violet hurried indoors to meet her mother.

"Mrs. Lee is with Miss Charlotte," said one of the servants in answer to Violet's inquiry.

On opening the door of her sister's bedroom, Violet was horrified at the sight which greeted her eyes. Mrs. Lee was

lying on the ground at the foot of Charlotte's bed, perfectly motionless and with a ghastly pallor spreading over her contracted features, while the poor crippled girl was making the most painful efforts to raise herself and come to her mother's assistance. Charlotte was calling loudly for help, when Violet entered the room. She rushed up to her mother, and was intensely relieved to find that Mrs. Lee had only fainted. Violet instantly applied the usual restoratives, but was alarmed to see how slowly they produced effect.

"Charlotte, what is this, what caused this dreadful faint, where has mother been to?" asked Violet, as she applied ether to Mrs. Lee's forehead. "Tell me, dear, what is the matter?" But Charlotte answered nothing, beyond sobbing painfully and in a terrified manner.

Gradually Mrs. Lee regained consciousness to Violet's intense relief. The poor woman now and then suffered from slight fainting fits, but none had ever been so severe as this one. Slowly she opened her eyes, and as her laggard wandering glance at last fell on Violet, she closed them again

at once, with almost an expression of loathing.

"Oh, Violet, Violet," she almost gasped. "You will kill me, you cruel—cruel girl," and she made a motion with her thin white hands as if to put her away from her.

"What are you saying, dearest mother?" asked Violet, astonished beyond measure. "Why, what do you mean?" and the poor girl's eyes wandered from her mother to her sister. "Charlotte, what does all this mean, you must know?" Charlotte still refused to answer.

When Violet had left her on the preceding afternoon, asking for time to consider her decision, Mrs. Lee had remained alone and buried in thought. The despairing look which she had seen in her daughter's eyes, when she had pressed her for a favourable answer, had touched the mother's heart, weak and shallow though it was. She had experienced a certain revulsion of feeling, and her better instincts for a time obtained the mastery over her egotism. Acting on a good impulse, Mrs. Lee had determined to make one final attempt in another direction, and if success

crowned her efforts, she hoped she might not, after all, be obliged to force her daughter into a marriage which appeared so distasteful to her.

Mrs. Lee had accordingly risen that morning several hours earlier than was her custom, and had betaken herself to Williamtown in the hope of obtaining some concession from the attorney of her estate, and of learning from his own mouth that matters were not really quite as bad as his letter had represented. She could not realise that her credit was absolutely gone, and she promised herself that she would leave no stone unturned in her endeavours to find some capitalist who would help her in her predicament. Her errand, however, had been entirely useless.

The attorney when he saw how desperately ill and weak Mrs. Lee appeared to be, really pitied the poor woman, and would willingly have done his best to help her, but he was forced to disclose the fact that the principal mortgagee had taken a great fancy to the plantation, and was determined to enter into possession of it. This creditor was a hard-hearted grasping

individual, who would suffer no sentimental considerations to come between him and the estate he coveted. Unless Mrs. Lee by some means or other could manage, during the next few weeks, to raise a sufficient amount of money to pay off this mortgage, the plantation would infallibly be put up for sale, and all hope of retaining possession of it would be at an end. As the required sum amounted to several thousands of pounds, the prospect of obtaining the money from any disinterested person was quite hopeless. There was now no help for it; on Violet's answer depended everything, and Mrs. Lee's nerves were strung to the highest pitch of anxiety at the thought of meeting her daughter and of hearing her decision. She was almost relieved to find, on arriving home, that Violet had gone out. It was a little respite, but hurrying to her invalid daughter's room, she anxiously inquired of her whether Violet had been there and had said anything relating to the subject on which everything depended.

"Oh, she's a horrid selfish thing, mother," was the answer that Charlotte

gave to the anxious question. Mrs. Lee turned pale with fear of what was coming next. "Yes, she came in here, and flounced out of the room, saying that if you or I thought we were going to make her marry any one, we were very much mistaken."

The blow had then fallen, all hope was thus at an end—was the terrifying conclusion which Mrs. Lee came to on hearing her daughter's words. Her overwrought feelings could not stand the sudden shock. The poor woman uttered an inarticulate cry and fell in a swoon at the foot of her daughter's bed. Charlotte was horrified at the effect of her spiteful words, and when Violet came in a moment after, she could do nothing but sob convulsively in answer to her sister's questions.

At last she managed to say half apologetically, and in a whimpering tone which showed she felt ashamed of herself: "I only said that you declared you wouldn't marry any one—I only——"

"Oh, Violet, how could you?" murmured Mrs. Lee, almost inarticulately, and looking as if she were going to faint again.

"But, mother, dearest, it's not true, I never said such a thing," broke in Violet, on her knees at her mother's feet and trying to gain possession of her hands. "I did not say so, on the contrary, dearie, cheer up, I have made up my mind to do as you wish, and will marry Mr. Nettley."

Then Violet burst into uncontrollable tears, and the poor girl felt choked as she realised that now she had irrevocably committed herself, and that the die was cast. Mrs. Lee could hardly believe her ears; the sudden revulsion of feeling was so great, that a violent fit of hysterics came on, and Violet was so occupied in nursing her mother that she had no time for further reflection on her own conflicting emotions.

CHAPTER II.

From the moment that Violet had signified her willingness to accept Joseph Nettley, Mrs. Lee's health improved in the most marvellous manner. Her excessive weakness disappeared as if by enchantment, and there was no longer the slightest sign of any desire to faint or swoon on slight provocations. The little lace pocket handkerchiefs had an unwonted period of rest, and the only tears which Mrs. Lee treated herself to now, were gentle little snivellings of joy at the success which was about to crown her projects, and of satisfaction in possessing such a dear, good dutiful daughter as Violet.

She was determined, however, that no time should be lost, and scarcely two hours after Violet had told her mother that she would marry Joseph Nettley, a dainty little scented note was written and despatched

by special messenger to Rockmount. This note was a marvel of epistolary skill and a perfect specimen of motherly solicitude and tenderness.

After informing Mrs. Nettley of the success of her embassy, it hinted, nevertheless, with great tact, that Nettley must not expect the same burning sentiments from his *fiancée* as characterised his own feelings, but that Violet being possessed of a very calm equable temperament, had expressed herself to her mother in a manner which showed that she was quite prepared to make him a good, faithful, and affectionate wife, and that Nettley must not expect more for the present.

Violet was not allowed an opportunity of seeing this note, or the terms in which it was written would certainly have been considerably modified. She was determined that she would not allow Nettley to marry her with any illusions as to her real feelings towards him, and she promised herself that she would tell him exactly what her sentiments were the very first time they met. If he were still desirous of marrying her on those terms, and without the love which

she felt she could not give him, at all events for the present, she would be satisfied to let things take their course. If, on the contrary, her mother had led him to believe more than was true, she would set him free at once, despite all consequences.

The next morning Mrs. Lee was sitting alone in the verandah, thinking placidly over forthcoming events. Violet had shut herself up in her room, and utterly refused to talk over the thousand and one little details which her mother was turning over in her mind, and would not have a word to say even about the all-important question of trousseau, etc., which Mrs. Lee was positively itching to discuss.

The sun was shining gorgeously, and Mrs. Lee's eyes wandered with satisfaction over the bright scene which lay before her. The bright-coloured garden, the great big shady tamarinds, and the soft-green cane-fields in the distance—all seemed to her this morning to be invested with increased charm and beauty, and the knowledge that all these handsome possessions were now comparatively assured to her, made the

good lady feel immensely satisfied with herself and with every one else.

Presently a figure walking up the long carriage-drive attracted her notice. Raising her eyeglass, she saw that it was only one of her own servants returning from his daily jaunt to Williamtown with the day's provisions and other messages. Mrs. Lee then remembered that the English fortnightly steamer had touched at Grenadilla the day before, and that the servant would most likely be carrying the letters and papers which had arrived by the mail. The fellow seemed to dawdle this morning in a most aggravating manner, and once or twice she felt inclined to send another servant out to him to make him hurry.

Mail-day in the West Indies is to most people the great red-letter epoch by which most others are reckoned, and many a solitary bachelor, who spends the best years of his life out there, looks on "mail-day" as representing the brightest moments of his exile. The feeling of absence from loved ones is lost for a short while; distance exists no longer, thousands of miles are bridged over in an instant, and the sight of

some dear familiar handwriting, even on the outside of an envelope, causes the heart to beat faster with the truest emotions, and the brightest pictures of home-life to rise up before the wanderer's eyes with intense vividness. How eagerly are the opening lines scanned, and how deep the sigh of relief and thankfulness when the tone of the first phrase shows that all is well with the dear ones so far away! So much may happen in a fortnight that it is almost with a feeling of dread that a letter is torn open, lest one should find that the fond mother, the loving sister, or the fondest loved one of all, who wrote so cheerfully and happily fourteen days ago, should now be in sickness, trouble, or even gone for aye!

Mrs. Lee, however, had no such sentiments when the mail-bag was handed to her. All the relations she possessed were distant connections who had lost nearly all interest in her when she had married and gone out to the West Indies so many years before. Still, there were a few old friends who wrote now and then, and Mrs. Lee was much disappointed on finding that the bag

contained nothing addressed to her, save a couple of bills and some newspapers There were two letters addressed to Violet though. One of them, by the handwriting on the address, was evidently from some feminine friend, but the other, in a large square envelope, at once attracted Mrs. Lee's attention. She started, as if a viper had bitten her, and feverishly clutching the letter, she cast a hurried and frightened glance around the verandah.

The mail-bag and its contents fell from her knees to the ground, and concealing the large square envelope under her little lace shawl, Mrs. Lee rose hastily, and with a flushed excited face, looked quickly into the neighbouring rooms. She then rushed into her own bedroom and locked the door.

Mrs. Lee was afraid to ask herself what she was about to do, and yet her mind had been made up the instant that her eyes had fallen on the letter. She was about to commit a wicked, despicable action, and she felt like a criminal. Tottering with uneven steps to an arm-chair, and casting another guilty look all round to convince herself that she was entirely alone, Mrs. Lee drew

out from under her shawl the letter which appeared to have such a powerful interest for her, and held it out at arm's length. An intense struggle was going on in the woman's mind, but the weakness of her character prevented her from withstanding the terrible temptation that was assailing her. The letter bore a London postmark, and the address was written in a bold thick hand which Mrs. Lee was sure she recognised. She seemed to have some doubts though, for after looking intently at the envelope for a moment or two, she suddenly rose from her chair, and went over to a little writing-table, and after rummaging hastily among a lot of odd notes and papers, seemed after a moment or two to have found the letter she was looking for.

It was a little note from Jack Moresby, which he had written to her a few weeks before his disappearance, and which Mrs. Lee remembered to have kept, for some reason or other.

"Yes, of course it's from him," she murmured, as she compared the handwriting of the note with that of the address on the unopened envelope. "Exactly the

same M, the same L. Must be from him! but from London!" There was no doubt about it; she felt sure that the letter was from Moresby, and that it was addressed to Violet! Mrs. Lee seemed to suddenly overcome her scruples, for pursing up her lips with a determined movement, she rapidly tore open the envelope.

CLIFFORD'S HOTEL, MORTON STREET, W.
15*th Jan.*, 188—.

I cannot head this hurried scrawl in the formal orthodox style, and yet I dare not write down what I long so much to say to you.

The mail for the West Indies closes in a few minutes, I find, so that I shall only have time to scribble a few words.

I cannot imagine what you must have thought of my sudden departure, leaving as I did without even bidding you farewell—and yet it was impossible for me to see you before I went, although I was so awfully anxious to do so. I wanted to tell you, Violet, all about what I began to say so clumsily, during our last ride, when that old bore interrupted us. I wanted to get your answer. Would it have been "Yes?" I will not ask you now, my darling, but implore you to wait just a little while until I can once more whisper in your sweet ear the words which fly to my lips every time I think of you.

I am not allowed to tell you yet the cause of my mysterious disappearance, or why I am over here. I am most terribly worried and anxious, but everything

will be settled to-night, one way or the other. Next mail will, I trust, carry me back to you a rich man, entirely free from all the worries and difficulties which have hampered me so terribly, or else — but, bah! I cannot, will not envisage any other eventuality.

I would give worlds to be able to tell you what it is all about, my darling, but I cannot. All I can do is to ask you to have a little patience and to believe, until next mail-day, that I love you with all my heart and soul.

Ever yours,
JOHN FITZROY MORESBY.

It was certainly not a model of letter writing, but it was, on the other hand, sufficiently incoherent for any love epistle, and poor Jack, when he wrote it was in such a state of feverish excitement that its defects did not strike him very forcibly.

Mrs. Lee read the letter to the end, only interrupting herself once or twice to give a sniff of contempt, or a little snort of indignation when she came to any phrase which seemed to her to be particularly audacious or uncalled for.

"I never heard of such a thing, never!" was all she could say, and then Violet's mother's tears flowed copiously. It was the poor woman's only resource. She was quite

unable to struggle against all her conflicting thoughts.

The letter annoyed and puzzled her beyond measure. That portion of it which said that he hoped to return to Grenadilla by the next steamer a rich man, attracted her notice, but matters being as they were, she determined to disbelieve anything like such a probability.

In a moment or two came a revulsion of feeling as she began to realize the vileness of the act of which she had just been guilty, and for some instants it was only with difficulty that Mrs. Lee restrained herself from rushing up to her daughter and confessing what she had done. This impulse was, however, quickly stifled, and in a few minutes she regained her self-possession.

Mrs. Lee shrewdly guessed that her daughter's doubts as to the genuineness of Jack's love, had done more than anything to induce her to agree to her mother's plans, and these doubts removed, all hope of a speedy marriage with Nettley would be irretrievably ruined.

Hypocritically comforting herself with the reflection that it was all for Violet's

ultimate good, Mrs. Lee quickly prepared to remove for ever all traces of her dishonourable act. A lighted match was speedily applied to a corner of the letter and the greedy yellow flames shot up and consumed the loving words which Jack had penned so full of hope and tenderness. Mrs. Lee could not help feeling as if she had committed a great crime, and shuddered as she noticed that the bold thick handwriting was still easily decipherable on the charred and blackened paper. Feverishly she crushed up and pulverised the offending ashes and as she cast them out of the window to the dispersing winds, she felt all the sensations of a criminal striving to blot out for ever all the marks and evidences of her crime.

The deed was done, and there was now no help for it. Violet's mother, to ease her overwrought feelings, then indulged in a lachrymose soliloquy on the motives which had induced her to conceal and destroy Jack's letter. So much thought and ponderous reflection were beyond Mrs. Lee, and throwing herself on her bed, she wept herself to sleep.

The poor lady was really a wonderful woman. She remained in the seclusion of her bedroom during the whole of that day, and when, after several hours' rest, she found herself face to face with Violet at dinner that evening, she had entirely resumed her placidity of demeanour. Mrs. Lee was beginning to look on the morning's episode quite in the light of ancient history, and if now and then a few little qualms rose to disturb her equanimity, they were speedily stifled by the reflection that all she had done was purely for Violet's own good.

She could not, nevertheless, help thinking once or twice how awkward it would be if Jack Moresby were really to return in a fortnight's time, and ask Violet whether she had received his letter. Mrs. Lee, however, did not allow this reflection to trouble her too much. In the first place she did not give the slightest importance to Jack's expressed hope of returning to Grenadilla in a fortnight's time, a rich man; that was absurd and was merely a young man's sanguine nonsense, only meant to induce Violet to keep up her interest in him. Even if he did return at an early

date, Violet would be engaged or perhaps married to Nettley by that time, and Mrs. Lee did not care much what happened once that happy event had come off. There was nothing to prove that Jack's letter had arrived at its destination, and it might easily be supposed to have miscarried. However, Mrs. Lee did not allow all these little worrying thoughts to disturb her beyond measure; she had a firm faith in the fact that everything generally turns out for the best in the end, and after a rather hurried meal she and Violet retired to their rooms to don their ball dresses.

There was to be a dance that night at Government House, to which the Lees and the Nettleys had of course been invited. But Violet did not look forward to it with any of the pleasurable anticipations which young girls usually have in such festivities.

She knew that Joseph Nettley would most probably propose to her there, and Violet could not refrain from looking on the whole matter as a most painful ordeal which she devoutly wished were over and done with. Many times during the day her heart had almost failed her, and the

oft-recurring thoughts of Jack made it most difficult for her to adhere to the resolution which it had cost her so much to arrive at.

That night, during the long drive from Belvoir to Government House, Mrs. Lee barely exchanged half-a-dozen words with her daughter. She feared to say anything which might possibly irritate Violet's overwrought feelings, and she knew by instinct that her wisest course was to let matters proceed without any further help or undue haste on her part. Violet sat perfectly still in her corner of the carriage and was secretly grateful to her mother for her silence. She did her best, in the gloom of the dark night, to compose all the conflicting thoughts and memories which rushed in chaos through her mind, but it was a hopeless task. It seemed impossible for her to realize that she had already decided her lot, and that she would be returning home, a few hours later, the affianced bride of a man whom she had never looked upon in any other light than as a mere acquaintance.

Although Mrs. Lee had forgotten that it was "mail-day," Violet had not, and notwithstanding that she had tried to school

her mind to indifference, it was a bitter pang when she found that the mail-bag had brought no news of Jack. Where was he? What was he doing? Was he indeed in trouble, and had he really done something to be ashamed of? Although she did her best to struggle against such thoughts, Violet could not prevent herself from confessing that if he had written only one little word or two to her, nothing on earth would induce her to pay the slightest attention to Joseph Nettley's addresses or those of any one else, even though it meant ruin, poverty and all their attendant miseries. But he had not written. There was not a line for her. She was most probably making a fool of herself and imagining all sorts of absurdities which her own inclinations had twisted into the idea that Jack loved her. Violet longed to know whether any news of him had been received at Palm Vale. If he had written to his overseer and not to her, it would be a sure sign that he cared no more for her than for any of the other girls whom he had met in Grenadilla. Her bitter reflections were cut short by their approach to the scene of festivities.

It was already late, as hours go in Grenadilla, and when the Lees' carriage drove past the sentries at the Government House gates, the delightful strains of one of Waldteufel's waltzes were resounding softly in the night air. The grounds were beautifully lighted with coloured lanterns, and several young couples were strolling among the winding gravel paths and cosy shrubberies.

The first person who met Violet's eyes as she and her mother were entering the ball room, was Joseph Nettley. He had been wandering about the doors for over an hour, anxiously awaiting their arrival. The poor fellow had been tortured with fear lest after all Violet should have retracted her word at the last moment, and he was in an agony of dread lest the ecstasy into which Mrs. Lee's letter had thrown him was doomed to be speedily replaced by despair. When at last he caught sight of Violet coming out of the cloak room, his honest face was so lighted up with intense delight that she could not help smiling sweetly at him as he gently took her hand and held it in his for an instant. Nettley's happiness and confusion

were such, that for the moment, he quite forgot Mrs. Lee, who was standing by watching the little scene and really quite affected by the evident depth of his love for Violet.

"You must not be so ungrateful as not to take any notice of me, you know," she said, tapping him lightly on the sleeve with her fan. "I feel quite offended, I assure you."

"Oh, I beg your pardon, dear Mrs. Lee," said Nettley, blushing to the roots of his hair, as he shook hands with Violet's mother, "I feel so happy that I declare I've quite lost my head and am really not responsible for my actions," he continued almost in an undertone, which however was loud enough to reach the ear of Violet, who was being quickly surrounded by a crowd of young dancers eager to fill her programme at once.

"Come along, Violet," said Mrs. Lee, "I see Lady Redfield over there; come and say 'how do you do' at once." This little manœuvre allowed Nettley to gain possession of Violet's programme for a moment, and hastily writing his initials opposite two square dances, he returned her the card.

"I'm not a dancing man, Miss Violet, so have only asked you for the Lancers which I know you don't care about."

Violet repaid his forbearance with a smile and Nettley was then forced to leave her to struggle with the unreasonable demands of other fellows, who would be satisfied with nothing less than waltzes.

Joseph was quite content to stand at one of the doors and gaze with delight on Violet's graceful figure as she glided round the spacious room in the slow, rhythmical whirl of a creole valse. And yet, oh! how he regretted at that moment that he was not a dancing man; although not of a jealous nature, how intensely he envied the happy man whose arm was then round her waist, and on whose sleeve rested her little gloved hand. Violet's partner was a first-rate waltzer and suited his step to hers with perfection. Otherwise he was a vapid, harmless, and rather conceited individual, and Joseph wondered how on earth the fellow managed to retain that placid, unemotional smirk, feeling that graceful little waist gently swaying on his arm, and that soft perfumed breath fanning his cheek.

Nettley's were not the only eyes that gazed admiringly on Violet that evening.

She was looking extremely well, and her gown of palest sea-green silk and tulle, with long black gloves, showed off delightfully the exquisite purity of her complexion and the clustering little curls of her golden-brown hair. She was far from enjoying her dances though, and some of her partners could not refrain from noticing that she was not as cheerful and smart as she generally was, and each one fell to wondering whether he could have possibly offended her in some way or other. Violet was passionately fond of waltzes, but that night she danced with a heavy heart. The well-known valse melodies reminded her with each variation of one of whom she had resolved to think no more; each tune brought back to memory some delightful occasion when Jack had guided her so skilfully through a maze of whirling dancers, only a few weeks ago. And now he was no longer there to scribble his name across so many numbers! He was gone, Heaven knows where, and would probably never see her again, or else

return to Grenadilla to find her the wife of another!

The ball-room was a very pretty one, brilliantly lighted, and with a floor like a mirror. All Grenadilla was there. It was one of the official dances which Colonial Governors are supposed to give two or three times a year, and to which every one who has the slightest pretension to being "somebody" is convened. As the good colonials are by no means deficient in pretensions, there was, naturally, a considerable crowd, and in addition to the forty or fifty people who formed the officers, rank and file, of the Government House "set," there was a considerably larger number of what Mrs. Topman styled "Bush people," and others who were only admitted to the glories of the gubernatorial abode on similar official occasions, and who generally dated their lives by taking such occasions as chronological events.

Oh! the heart-burnings and anxieties which had torn the breasts of many of these worthy people during the fortnight which preceded the dance. How intense

the fear lest they should not receive the coveted invitations, and oh! the intense satisfaction when, after the seventh of their daily visits to the little district post office, the longed-for square envelope with the blue crown was handed to them!

And then the dresses! How the fashion-plates of the 'Lady's Journal' were eagerly scanned, and how much care, deliberation, and anxious thought were gone through before the final choice was made!

"Maria, dear, shall I wear pure pink, or orange and black?" or "Look! don't you think this shade of green would look lovely?" Then the worthy Grenadillan planters' wives and daughters would get on their horses and invade their heterogeneous stores in the little district towns, and in the midst of a varied assortment of horns, blacking, novels, and boots, would turn over the shopman's whole stock of silks, satins, lace, and muslins before definitely making their choice. The country dress-makers would utterly refuse to be worked to death, and many a dame and lively damsel had to concoct her own gown and

furbelows; the result being a style and *chic* which would have literally astounded a Paris *faiseuse.*"

"Are you going to the ball?" "Of course you have your invite." "I suppose you're going to the dance?" etc., etc., would be heard and said by every one on coming out of church, or on meeting anywhere else.

"Oh, yes, I suppose I must go, a dreadful trouble, though," would languidly answer a lady who, the night before she had received her card, had suffered from two distinct andviolent attacks of hysterics, brought on by fear of not getting the longed-for invitation.

People came from all parts of the island. No distance was thought too great to prevent guests from getting to the ball. In many districts, where the roads were too bad for driving, cavalcades of men and lady riders might have been seen wending their way over the mountains towards Williamtown, the scene of the festivity. The worthy planters' wives and daughters, in all shades of white and brown complexions, trotted along with their male

relatives, followed by a veritable army of camp-followers. Each man was followed by a sturdy native carrying a portmanteau with his master's dress clothes; each dame and damsel accompanied by a dusky wench on foot, carrying on her head a huge native basket, which contained the exquisite toilette which was destined to eclipse all others. These waiting wenches generally helped themselves along the steep and weary roads by hanging on with one hand to the rather unkempt tails of their mistress's ponies, and at the end of the journey would turn into deft handmaidens, cunning in all the art of hair-dressing and other feminine mysteries.

The hour on the invitation cards was 9.30, but most of the country guests left their rural homes in the early morning, so as to be able to take a well-earned siesta at the end of their long jaunt, and before donning the glorious habiliments which had cost so many hours of hard labour and thought.

The town friends hospitably received the country mice, and many were so good as to allow ten or even twelve of their lady

friends to dress in a room set apart for the purpose. The comfort of dressing under such conditions may be imagined. A moderate-sized bedroom, scantily furnished; ten country ladies, each needing the ministrations of her particular attendant. Ten trunks or voluminous "carib" baskets containing the "creations," one small looking-glass, and you have a correct picture of the interior of many of the town houses on this eventful evening. In some rooms, where several of the ladies happen to be of considerable bulk, the more slim ones have to make room by standing inside their trunks, and laying their gowns in the covers of them. If any one of the dames should happen to have lately returned from Europe, and possess a reputation for elegance, she dresses with all the publicity which used to mark the *petit lever* of the *grandes dames* of the eighteenth century, and eighteen pairs of eager eyes are intently fixed upon her, so that an entirely accurate idea may be obtained of how much of a certain "mystery," if any, ought to be placed in a certain position; whether the correct colour of stays is white

or darker tints, or whether the elegant lady under observation makes use of any fictitious aids to acquire that appearance of style which has attracted such attention? However, all these little troubles are got through somehow or other, and the crowd of expectant dancers make their way in good time to the Governor's abode, fully resolved to make the most of the elegant function to which they have been invited.

As has been said before, every one was there. All our friends of the tennis-court, including worthy Mrs. Topman, looking majestic in black, and talking loudly of her Attorney-General, who, however, kept discreetly in the background. The Colonial Secretary's pretty wife, looking particularly nice and jolly; the Treasurer's wife, and the mob of spouses of all the other officials, great and otherwise; deaf old Lady Blunt was there filling the largest arm-chair in the room, and all the nonentities and nondescripts also in full force. Vulgar little old Smith with his stutters was perpetually wandering about in the vicinity of the buffet, and was heard to declare that

"p-p-people were p-p-packed like herrings in a b-b-barrel," and that, notwithstanding the great heat, "the g-g-girls were all j-j-jumping about like p-p-parched peas in a frying p-p-pan!"

The ball was certainly a great success, and poor Lady Redfield, who received her guests at the entrance of the ball-room with delightful grace, was quite worn out by shaking the hands of what she began to think must surely form a large section of the whole population of the island.

At last the moment which Violet could not help dreading arrived, and when the band struck up the opening bars of a set of Lancers, Joseph Nettley found himself standing at her elbow. The poor fellow was terribly nervous, and for the life of him could not think of anything appropriate to say. He began to stammer something and blushed so painfully that Violet, observing his evident distress, considerately came to his assistance, and smiling to her last partner, took Joseph's arm, and walked away with him towards the broad verandah which led out into the gardens.

Nettley's heart was beating so loud and

fast that he felt sure that Violet could almost hear it. He was in an agony of bashfulness, and all the suitable phrases which he had rehearsed to himself, over and over again during the day, had entirely faded out of his mind, and he found it impossible to remember a single one of the words which came to him so glibly when he was alone and holding an imaginary conversation with Violet. He felt sure that she must think him utterly ridiculous, and yet, after a silence which seemed to him an eternity, he could find nothing more original to say than that he hoped Violet would not find it too cool in the verandah after dancing so much.

Then in silence they wandered down one of the little gravel paths, which was only dimly illumined by the flickering light of some Japanese lanterns that gently swung in the branches of the twisted shrubs. There was a caressing softness in the balmy night-breeze, and clumps of lilies and tuberoses scented the air. A young moon threw silvery gleams on the rustling leaves, while now and then a little bird, high up in the trees, twittered a little note of surprise

at the unwonted sound of the distant music wafted in gentle gusts by the wind.

Almost unconsciously they entered the little arbour, which was discreetly sheltered by the broad leaves of a fan-palm, and, side by side they seated themselves on a rustic stone bench, over which pale pink roses had strewn their faded petals. A little fountain threw up its tiny jet of rippling silver in the corner of the arbour, and splashed the leaves of the soft, maiden-hair ferns with little crystal drops, which glistened like a shower of the purest diamonds as they fell reflecting the glow of the red and green lights of the fairy-lamps.

The soothing charm of the surroundings seemed suddenly to imbue Nettley with some of the boldness and nerve which, up to now, he lacked so much, and assuring himself that no unwelcome neighbour was within ear-shot, to Violet's surprise, he gently gained possession of her ungloved hand, and imprinted a burning kiss upon it.

He had passed the Rubicon, and all his painful shyness seemed to fall from him like a cloak. In a deep, low voice, full of heartfelt emotion, he poured into Violet's

ears all that hitherto he had not dared to avow; all his sorrows, his joys, and the doubts which assailed and maddened him. He told her how intensely happy her mother's letter had made him, and how difficult it was for him to believe that the fondest, happiest dreams which it were possible for a man to make might perhaps be realised.

"I cannot believe it, nor imagine that it may indeed be true, until I hear it from your own lips," he continued, bending towards her, his face flushed with happy eagerness, and pressing her little hand between his, "Oh, Miss Violet—Violet! you cannot imagine how fondly, madly I love you, nor could I find words to express the depth of my feeling. I do not seem to have lived before I saw your sweet face, and cannot imagine what a blank my life must have been before your loved image came into it and filled it so entirely. Tell me, darling, is it true? Can it be really true that you will be my own sweet wife? Let me hear it from your own lips, and say that you will try to love me, even a little."

Violet was surprised beyond measure,

and could hardly realise that the impassioned man, from whose lips fell all these burning words, could possibly be the nervous, timid Joseph Nettley, who had hitherto hardly dared to look at her, and who had always blushed scarlet whenever she happened to address a word to him. Violet was not prepared for this; she had imagined that the interview would have been a very quiet, business-like affair, characterised by intense timidity and shyness on Nettley's part, and by quiet, premeditated words and conditional assent on hers. But this was entirely different; Joseph seemed to have undergone an entire metamorphosis, and the painfully shy, self-conscious man had suddenly turned into the most impassioned lover. Violet could not help feeling more affected than she cared to own by the evident depth of his love and devotion. No woman possessed of true feeling can ever remain entirely untouched by the sight of an honourable man laying his whole heart at her feet, and Violet could not repress a sentiment which, though not love, was still a little more than friendship, for the man

who was so thoroughly transformed by her influence on him. She was determined, however, to adhere to the resolutions which she had made that morning, and was firmly resolved that Joseph should not remain for a moment in ignorance of the motives which had induced her to accept him, nor would she allow him to marry her with any illusions as to the real state of her feelings towards him.

Nettley tremblingly awaited her answer. Her first words cut him like a blow, and the poor fellow turned deathly pale.

"I am sincerely sorry, Mr. Nettley," Violet began, "that you should love me as truly as I believe you do, because it makes it doubly hard for me to have to tell you that I cannot truthfully say that I love you in return."

Joseph almost groaned with the pain which her words caused him, and unconsciously he squeezed the little hand which he held between his with so much force that she was obliged to draw it away.

"Oh, forgive me, Violet, clumsy brute that I am," he exclaimed, falling on one knee before her, and regaining possession

of her hand, which he tenderly kissed, "your words cut me like a knife, and I don't know what I'm doing—but, for God's sake, don't say you can never love me! Oh, my darling, you may not love me now, but you will—you must—you could not remain for ever insensible to my adoration! Only say now that you do not hate or despise me, and say that you will let me devote my whole life to you. I don't ask for more, but oh, Violet, say that you will be my wife, and I know, I am certain, that the love which you do not feel now, will come later."

"I've already given you my answer," murmured Violet with difficulty, for Joseph's love had touched her. "I do not know what my mother wrote to yours yesterday, but I am determined that you shall know the whole truth, and that you shall not blindly commit yourself to any irretrievable act which might ruin your life and mine for ever. I said just now that I do not love you—yet it is the truth—if you are still willing to marry me knowing this, I will not go back on the word which I gave my mother, but I beg of you to think well over

this, and consider seriously whether your feelings for me are not due to a passing sentiment, and whether your life might not be irretrievably ruined by marrying a girl who would not bring the love that a wife ought to bring. Nothing has been done which cannot be undone, and you are perfectly free."

"But I won't be free," exclaimed Joseph; "freedom without you is death to me! I *have* considered, I've thought over everything thousands of times, ever since I first saw you; only say, dearest, that you will marry me and that you will let me try to win your love. We should be so happy, Violet, I would have no will but yours, we should live wherever you would like to; my dear old mother loves you already as a daughter, I'm sure you would get on well with her. I'm told that Mrs. Lee is worried about the affairs of her plantation; I will remove all her anxieties, and anything else you might have the slightest desire for, my darling, you could not make me happier than by saying what it is."

Violet replied by placing her hand once more in Joseph's, and with exquisite gentle-

ness, the delighted lover kissed her on the little curls which clustered round her forehead.

In the meantime Mrs. Lee was in an agony of suspense. She had remained most of the evening seated between Lady Redfield and our friend Mrs. Topman, and no Argus-eyed chaperon ever watched over a girl at a dance with more care than did Mrs. Lee over Violet's movements. She felt quite put out and annoyed whenever she noticed any one of her daughter's partners paying her more attention during the dance than she thought was strictly necessary. The poor lady feared all sorts of things, and earnestly longed for the moment when Nettley would muster up the courage to take Violet aside. She knew that he had asked her for the Lancers, and Mrs. Lee could hardly restrain her impatience to hear the band strike up the introduction to that dance.

When, however, she at last saw Violet going out into the verandah on Joseph's arm, her anxiety and excitement were such that during the few minutes of their absence she remained perfectly silent and

entirely oblivious of the fact that Mrs. Topman and the Governor's wife several times addressed remarks to her. The critical moment had arrived, and although she placed considerable reliance on the fact that Violet had already pledged herself to accept Nettley, still Mrs. Lee was in an agony of dread lest Joseph should prove himself such a clumsy, unsympathetic lover and so deficient in tact as to offend Violet in some way or other. Her eyes never left the door that led out into the verandah, and her delight can be imagined when she at last saw Joseph and Violet re-enter the ball-room. A single glance at the happy man's radiant face laid all Mrs. Lee's fears at rest in an instant, and two little tears of relieved fear and anxiety rolled slowly down her wan, delicate cheeks.

By the time Violet and her *fiancé* came up, however, Mrs. Lee had already regained her equanimity, and holding out her hand to Joseph, she pressed his warmly, saying in an arch but motherly little manner:

"You need not say anything, my dear boy, I know all about it already, the happiness which beams all over your face

would tell its own story to a blind man, I am sure," then turning to Violet she drew down her daughter's pretty head, and kissed her affectionately.

"My sincerest congratulations, my dear Mrs. Lee," said Mrs. Topman, as the two young people moved away, "your daughter could not have done better, the Attorney-General has the very highest opinion of Mr. Nettley, I assure you."

CHAPTER III.

We must now return to Sam Bret, and relate what befell him during his absence from Jack.

It will be remembered that their separation at Barbadoes was very sudden and unexpected, and that Sam had parted company from his young master in order to overhaul the passengers on the Royal Mail steamer, while Jack Moresby was similarly engaged on board the American Liner.

Sam Bret had accordingly, immediately on getting on board the steamer, proceeded to make a rigid search right through the ship for the ravishers of the casket. He was determined that his search would be conscientiously made, for there was every probability that the two men would be found either in one ship or in the other. There was evidently no time to lose, for bells were ringing, and quartermasters were shouting all round the decks, warning the

shore people to leave the vessel. Preparations were being made for shipping the gangway, and in another minute the anchor would be hoisted. Sam lost no time among the first-class passengers, but dived down at once into the fore saloon and peeped into every cabin and corner of that part of the ship.

He had not far to seek, however, for on issuing from the last cabin on the starboard side, his eyes fell on a form which he at once recognised. It was Sneat's partner, the black man Josiah, and he was evidently quite unaware of Sam's proximity. The man was hurrying along the passage with his arms full of rugs and other impediments. Sam followed him unobserved, shrewdly suspecting that the master thief was not far off. After a few moments' pursuit, he saw Josiah disappear with his bundle into one of the second-class cabins on the port-side. Quickly hurrying up, Sam peeped through the partly-open door, and perceived the object of his quest bending over some packages on the floor.

"Come in and shut the door," snapped out Sneat as Josiah entered. "Move your

hulking body out of the light, and help me put this darned box under the bunk. I've been breaking my back over it for the last ten minutes, trying to cram it in here."

"Why it's all right there, isn't it?" asked Josiah.

"All right, is it? You black idiot," snarled Sandy. "Can't you see that one of them other two bunks is taken, and that we shall have at least one, if not two, other blokes packed up in here along of us? We don't want nobody 'ere asking questions about what's in the box—and besides, if they did, we couldn't answer them."

"No, that's just it, we couldn't," returned Josiah, who was evidently not very satisfied. "I only hope this is not a wild-goose chase after all, and that the box does hold all what you say it does, Sneat. You know I've spent a lot of money over this job, and I want to see something for it! I've only got your word for the value of its contents, you know."

"Now you just shut your jaw, you darned nigger!" said Sneat in a low threatening voice, staring right into the black man's eyes with a villainous expression. "You

just stop your row, you hear; I ain't a going to 'ave any of that rot, and I warn you, I knows what I knows, and I'm as sure about the contents of that box, as I know that you're a sniggering ass. And what's more, Mister Josiah, if you ain't pleased, you've only got to sheer off now and go right back ashore. I don't want you much more, you've paid for the passage tickets, and if you weren't the fool you are, you'd keep quiet and say nothing. Now I've warned you for the last time, so don't let's hear any more of your gibbering about the money you've advanced, or it will be the worse for you."

Josiah was evidently cowed, for he said nothing, and bending down, he helped Sneat to push the package which had caused the altercation, under one of the bunks.

Sam had heard enough, and he rushed away at once to send for Jack with all speed, so that the two thieves might be prevented from getting away with their booty. He hurried up on deck, and on arriving there, was horrified to find that the ship he was on was rapidly making way through the water.

It was too late to leave the vessel, and he was being carried away with her.

They were at that moment passing just under the lee of the American steamer, which Jack was occupied in searching, and Sam helping himself up by some of the rigging, stood on the bulwarks and eagerly scanned the decks of the other ship. His searching glances fortunately soon fell on Jack, just as the latter was emerging from the saloon stairs and advancing towards the quarter deck.

Sam shouted, waved his arms and gesticulated like a madman, and was at last delighted to find that he had attracted Moresby's attention. Quickly looking round to see whether either of the confederates were in his neighbourhood, he shouted out: "They're here, sir, here on board!" There was no time for more. An instant later, the distance which separated the ships was too great to allow of any further communication.

Sam jumped down from his vantage point, and then the awkwardness of his situation struck him for the first time. It suddenly flashed upon him that he was

being borne away, willy-nilly, towards England, and that it was quite impossible for him to leave the ship. The captain would not, for one moment, think of stopping the vessel and lowering a boat for him, and would in all probability force him to work his passage to England in return for his keep. Sam, however, then remembered that he was well provided with money. Fortunately for him, Jack had, as we know, given him the day before some of old Quamina's legacy to carry, and Bret knew that the fact of his being possessed of funds would considerably lessen the anxiety which his employer must have felt on seeing him borne away by the departing steamer.

All things considered, there was much to be thankful for. It was, of course, most unfortunate that Jack Moresby should be on the wrong ship, but, on the other hand, it would have been much worse if the two thieves had been able to get away unfollowed, and entirely unhampered. As it was, Sneat and his confederate were both on board the Royal Mail steamer, and it was evident from what had been said in the

cabin, that the treasure casket was still in their possession. It would, moreover, also appear that they had not been able to open it, in order to verify its contents. There was, accordingly, the same perplexing uncertainty as to its value. Sam calculated that Jack would proceed to England on the very first opportunity, and he sincerely hoped that by the time they met again, he might in some manner or other, have obtained possession of the casket. The honest young mulatto glowed with pride as he thought how delighted he would be, if he were able to show his gratitude for the many benefits which he had received from the young planter and his old father, by placing in Jack's hands the treasure that would enable him to retrieve his fallen fortunes.

Sam knew that he would have to proceed with the greatest care, and that in dealing with Sneat, he would have to bring all his 'cuteness and intelligence to battle with the craft and cunning which he knew the rascal to possess. Open violence would be worse than useless. Sneat and Josiah were on board the steamer in the character of honest passengers who had paid their fares

like any one else, and Sam was sure that nothing whatever would be gained by going to the captain and reporting to him that the two men were running away with a casket of unknown treasure which rightly belonged to Jack Moresby of Palm Vale. He had nothing to prove his story, and such a marvellous tale of treasure trove, which even from the lips of a white man would find but little credence, would be certainly scouted at when told by a mulatto who had come on board in a surreptitious manner, and unprovided with even a passage ticket.

Sam cogitated for a long while over the predicament, without being able to decide on any definite course of action. The first thing to be done, however, was to go to the purser and pay for a second-class passage to Southampton ; be formally enrolled as a passenger and then see how the land lay. The matter of clothes did not give him much anxiety, as being sufficiently well provided with money, he knew that he could easily obtain from the sailors or stewards the few articles he might require.

In the matter of bunks, luck again favoured Sam. The ship happened to be

very full of passengers, and there was but little choice of cabins for the second-class travellers.

"Your bunk is number 47; it's in the third cabin along the starboard passage, leading out of the fore-saloon," said the purser, as he handed over the receipt for the passage money.

Sam started off at once to inspect his quarters, and, on arriving in front of the cabin indicated, was astounded to find that it was the very one occupied by Sneat and Josiah. This was indeed a predicament, and for the moment Bret could hardly collect his thoughts. He listened an instant at the door, and hearing no sound, determined to enter boldly. Fortunately it was empty.

It was an ordinary second-class cabin, containing four bunks, two on each side. Every available square inch of room was taken up by the couches, the lavatory arrangements, and a tiny little bit of a settee just under the port-hole. Three of the bunks were covered with a litter of rugs, bags and parcels, while under one of them on the floor, was a solid-looking deal box. In an instant, Sam was on his knees beside

it. A single push sufficed to show that its contents were of considerable weight, and Bret at once came to the conclusion that the box contained the mysterious iron casket, which had led them so far afield. It was now once more within his grasp. It was hard to believe that this innocent-looking white deal case possibly contained immense wealth, and Sam surveyed it almost with a feeling of awe. Ought he to remove it at once and try to conceal it, or should he boldly lay claim to it, and refer the whole matter to the captain of the ship?

Now that Sam Bret was face to face with the object of his quest, he was quite at his wits' ends to know what to do with it. He could hardly remove the case, as he had no secure hiding-place, and Sneat on discovering his loss, would be sure to raise such a hue and cry that the whole ship would be searched. The box would be found in his possession and he would most certainly be looked upon and treated as a thief.

If, on the other hand, he reported the whole matter to the captain of the ship, his improbable story would most likely be

disbelieved and no notice taken of it, or if credited, it would attract the very storm of public attention to the casket which he knew Moresby had every reason to dread.

Sam was standing in the middle of the cabin buried in thought, when the sound of approaching footsteps suddenly roused him from his puzzling reflections. Was it Sandy Sneat? If so, what ought he to do? The meeting was inevitable, and yet Sam was unable on the spur of the moment to decide on any definite course of action.

The door was pushed open; but the young mulatto was intensely relieved to find that the intruder was neither Sneat nor his companion. It was the fourth cabin fellow, a pallid sharp-featured young Barbadian, who, after casting a hurried glance at Bret, took no further notice of him, and occupied himself in setting his traps and belongings to rights.

Not wishing to come across Sneat before he had matured some plan of action, Sam hastily left the cabin, and found his way right forward among the cargo and merchandise which littered the decks.

Ensconcing himself under the lee of two

immense packages, he proceeded to think over the curious chain of circumstances which had resulted in his now finding himself separated from Jack Moresby, and on board a steamer bound for England, having Sneat and Josiah for fellow-passengers and the coveted casket almost in his own grasp.

He was, however, not allowed much time for reflection, for a few minutes after he had settled himself for a serious spell of thought, two bells rang out, and some one passing informed him that it was dinner-time. Sam thought that it might perhaps be as well that his first meeting with Sneat should be in public, rather than in the comparative privacy of their cabin, so after a minute or two, he descended the stairs leading to the fore-saloon, together with the other second-class passengers, and took his seat at the table.

Down the whole length of the long cabin ran a narrow table covered with plates and dishes of extraordinary thickness and strength, interspersed with cutlery of coarse material. Chunks of stodgy-looking yellowish bread lay next to each plate,

while a musty unappetising odour was exhaled by a table-cloth of more than doubtful hue. The people who formed the second-class passengers, however, did not seem to be accustomed to better accommodation, and they set to work upon the viands provided by the ship's caterer with vigorous appetites. The sea happened to be beautifully calm, and the ship heaved with such a gentle imperceptible motion, that even the very worst sailor could hardly have found a pretext for feeding the fishes. There were accordingly very few of those vacancies at the long table which are so often to be observed on the first days of a voyage.

As soon as Sam had taken his seat, he glanced down the two rows of his fellow-passengers, to find out where Sneat and Josiah were placed, but they had evidently not yet taken their seats as he saw no sign of them. Guessing that they would not be long in turning up, he went on with his meal, and when it was almost half over, he saw the two men in whom he was so much interested, enter the saloon, and in a rather shame-faced manner, seat themselves side

by side in the places indicated to them by one of the stewards.

Sneat's outward man had considerably improved since Sam had last seen him in Grenadilla. The ragged garments and tattered boots, that would hardly hold together, had been discarded either in Trinidad or at Barbadoes, and he was now clad in a new but ill-fitting ready-made suit of snuff-coloured tweed, which hung loosely on his gaunt, angular frame. The change of garb, however, did not make him look much more respectable or trustworthy, and he bore the stamp of villainy on his sharp sallow features as unmistakably as ever. His beady little black eyes wandered restlessly about, and shifted uneasily under everybody's gaze. His thin sandy-coloured hair had been closely cropped, and a pair of large unhealthy looking ears stuck out aggravatingly on each side of his narrow skull. Next to him was the man who had paid for the new suit of clothes, the boots, the hair-cutting, and all the rest of it, and Josiah Sampson, in his sober if rather rusty suit of black, looked many degrees more respectable than his white companion. He

was a short, fat, rather oily-looking negro, somewhat more than middle-aged. The grizzled wool on the top of his head, a fringe of the same round his black, fat face, and the rotundity of his squat person, might have endowed him with a certain air of guileless trustworthiness, had not the whole effect been marred by a pair of restless black eyes, which were set in unwholesome-looking streaky yellow orbits.

Josiah was not looking happy, and his heart was evidently beginning to fail him as to the probable profits which might be derived from the very risky enterprise which Sneat had induced him to join. So far it had been entirely a case of paying out on his part. Sneat had come straight to him that night, in Grenadilla, and after hearing all that old Quamina had confided to Jack Moresby on her deathbed, Josiah had allowed himself to be so much influenced by Sneat's representations, and his promise to share the booty with him, that he had agreed to supply all the money necessary to bring the plot to a successful issue. It had, however, been a much more expensive undertaking than he had counted

upon, for what with the chartering of the sloops from Grenadilla to Trinidad and Barbadoes, the passage tickets to England, and the unmerciful way in which Sneat had drawn upon him for extras of all sorts, a considerable sum of money had left his pockets since the night of their flight from Grenadilla. Sneat, too, now that he was safely out of the West Indies and on his way to England, was beginning to treat his black partner with but scant ceremony. The unfortunate man had never been out of Grenadilla in his life, and being quite dazed by the multitude of strange things that he saw for the first time, he clung to his companion in guilt in a manner which was almost childlike.

Josiah Sampson was a good representative of one of the worst types of the West Indian negro. Possessing none of the simple-mindedness which makes the unsophisticated black an attractive object to many, he had a faint smattering of education which he turned to account by taking every possible mean advantage of his more simple fellows. No petty questionable transaction was too small and insignificant for him, provided

that it presented certain chances of exorbitant profit. Though cautious and cowardly to a degree, Josiah had several times crossed the narrow line which separates the questionable from the criminal in his petty-fogging speculations, but he had always been hitherto fortunate enough to escape the clutches of the law. His cunning and duplicity in fact were such, that among a good many people Josiah passed for a very decent God-fearing sort of man, perhaps not remarkable for unostentatious charity, but very much to the fore as regarded punctual attendance at chapel or prayer-meeting.

Every Sunday, his fat, black person, arrayed in severe but greasy-looking sable habiliments, might be seen wending his way to the parish church, mounted on a seedy little grey pony, his short fat legs, with extremities clad in number tens, sticking out ridiculously on either side. At the place of worship, Josiah's unctuous voice was plainly and irritatingly audible in the matter of responses, and few would have imagined that the meek-looking sheep who seemed to be the very acme of dusky respect-

ability, was, under cover of a loud "Glory be, etc.," busily concocting some dirty little plan for the swindling of his more simple fellow negroes.

His conversation was always plentifully interlarded with biblical quotations, generally quite inapposite and incorrect. These pious ejaculations would come in on every possible occasion, and were often very ridiculous. Josiah, however, frequently found them useful in tiding over uncomfortable pauses, and the sanctified expression which would come over his fat features on these occasions was excessively funny.

The robbery of the casket, and the burning of Jack's sugar-canes, were undertakings far beyond his usual line of business, and though the magnitude of the booty dazzled him by its probable value, the risks and dangers which he was running had more than once caused him to bitterly repent ever having engaged in the enterprise. He had speedily discovered that in the matter of roguery, he was a simple child as compared with Sneat, and the unhappy black was beginning to fear that his partner would throw him over like a squeezed

orange the moment he had no further need of him, and that participation in the contents of the casket was beginning to be even more than problematical.

Both he and Sneat felt and looked uncomfortable, the latter evidently ill at ease at the idea of being brought into closer contact with such a large number of his more honest fellow men, and especially, being burdened with the consciousness of the enterprise in which he was engaged. For some moments the two men busily applied themselves to their food, and did full justice to the heaped-up plates before them.

Presently, however, between two mouthfuls, Sneat took a long breath and ventured a glance down the table at his fellow-passengers. When his wandering eyes finally fell on Sam Bret, who just then happened to be looking straight at him, Sneat turned deadly pale, and his astonishment and consternation were such that for the moment he seemed paralysed. The piece of ham which he was at that moment in the act of conveying to his mouth, never reached its destination, for his surprise and trepidation were so intense that the fork

which he was holding slipped from his fingers, and fell clattering into his plate. The noise attracted his companion's attention, and Josiah, noticing Sandy's very apparent discomfiture, tremblingly looked round to observe the cause of it. In an instant he also recognised Sam Bret's unwelcome face, and the unhappy black was so overcome by his emotion that his complexion positively paled, and assumed a greyish-green colour peculiar to negroes under the influence of fear.

Sneat, however, quickly resumed a portion of his usual presence of mind, and hastily snatching a rather soiled handkerchief from his pocket, he pressed it spasmodically to his mouth, and left the table with that haste which is common to persons who are just beginning to succumb to the attacks of the treacherous sea-god. Josiah followed in his wake like a shadow, and the two men precipitately disappeared into the obscurity of one of the passages.

"Rather a sudden attack that," observed a fat man who had been Sandy's *vis-à-vis* at the table. "Never saw a man took like that so quick in all my life; 'e was stuffin'

'isself like as if 'e 'adn't 'ad a decent meal in 'is life, a minute before. But them bilious-looking yaller chaps 'ardly ever is good sailors."

Sam might perhaps have explained the reason for this very sudden attack of sea-sickness, had he so cared; but he thought it best to wait a little while, knowing that Sandy and his companion were quite unable to leave the ship until its arrival at Southampton twelve days later, and that during that time they would be under his constant supervision. Luck having favoured him so greatly in making him their cabin-fellow, he resolved that they should never for one moment escape his vigilance.

Sneat and Josiah were quite appalled by the discovery that Sam was on board the ship. They had guessed that Jack Moresby on discovering the robbery of the casket, would certainly leave no stone unturned to discover the thieves, but although suspicion might attach itself to them, still they had flattered themselves that once out of Grenadilla, they were fairly safe from pursuit. They had been quite ignorant of the fact that Jack and his overseer had tracked

them to Trinidad and Barbadoes, and Sam's presence on board that ship at once proved that not only were they suspected of being the perpetrators of the theft, but they at once jumped to the conclusion that Bret was also aware that the casket of treasure was on board the steamer and in their possession.

As soon as they had gained the welcome shelter of the dark passage, Sneat at once removed the handkerchief from his mouth, and all signs of imminent sea-sickness disappeared forthwith. For a moment or two neither of the men seemed capable of finding words in which to express the astonishment and consternation which the sight of Sam had produced.

"When the —— did 'e come aboard?" at last ejaculated Sneat. "What's 'e 'ere for, and where's Moresby?"

"Mr. Moresby's first class, I expect, and ready to put his hand on us any minute, I s'pose," answered Josiah, groaning as he leaned up against the side of the passage. "Oh! dis is a nice piece of business you've brought me into, dis is! I wish I'd never listened to all your lies and promises, Sandy

Sneat! If I hadn't, I'd still have been an honest man, and not afraid of nobody: 'for de righteous is delibered out ob de trouble.' I've done nothin' but pay out since we lef' de place, and now we ain't going to get nothin' but prison, and de debbil knows what else! 'De Lord is my Shepherd, and He will gib me rest!'"

Josiah was rattling on his grievances at a tremendous rate, and finding that Sneat did not shut him up as peremptorily as would have been the case at any other time, he felt a grim sort of satisfaction in laying all the blame of the unsuccess of the enterprise on his companion's shoulders. Sneat, however, was hardly listening to a word of the black man's recriminations, and was standing with his arms crossed on his chest, evidently buried in most unpleasant thought.

Josiah continued—

"Five pound for de sloop to Trinidad, six pound for de journey to Barbadoes; de vey clothes 'pon your back was anoder two; all de money you make me spend in Barbadoes, and de passage——" Here his dismal calculations were ruthlessly and violently cut short, for Sneat, suddenly

recollecting himself, doubled his fist and dealt his unfortunate companion such a sounding blow on the side of his head, that poor Josiah fairly reeled, and nearly measured his length on the floor of the passage. Before he had time to recover himself, Sneat had him by the collar of his coat, shaking him two or three times until the unhappy black's teeth almost rattled in his head. Then, in a low threatening voice, Sneat muttered, within two inches of his face—

"You dirty nigger, you! I warned you already about this, didn't I? Didn't I tell you that if ever you dared to grumble at what I did or said, I'd cut your black throat for you—eh?" Every sentence was punctuated by a vigorous shake, and Josiah was so completely terrified by the really demoniacal expression on the bully's face that he almost collapsed with fright, and abjectly begged pardon for what he had dared to say.

"Now, then, out of the way, please, and don't block the gangway!" called out one of the under-stewards who was trying to pass along the passage with an armful of

plates and dishes. "If you want to fight, there is plenty of room up on deck."

Sandy's hand quickly slid down from the region of Josiah's coat collar, and slipping his arm confidentially into that of the black man, he led him away in an effusively amiable manner towards their cabin, jocularly remarking to the under-steward that they "were only 'avin' a bit of a lark, you know!"

Josiah's discomposed expression, however, was not precisely suggestive of a lark, and it was with a feeling of utter despair that he subsided on to one of the bunks in their cabin.

"It's all right, Josiah," mumbled Sneat, half apologetically; "things isn't as bad as they look; they ain't got no proof to show that the box is theirs, and what's more, they can't be sure that we've got it on board. Cheer up, old pal, and don't give way like a darned old pudding!"

Sneat was beginning to fear that he had perhaps gone too far with Josiah, and probably a recollection presented itself to him concerning thieves falling out and honest men getting their own thereby.

"Not so bad as dey look, ugh!—look dere!" answered Josiah, pointing to a hat lying on the opposite bunk, and on which his eyes had been fixed in a dazed manner while his companion had been talking.

Sneat pounced on the hat, turned it over viciously, and glared at it as if he were struggling with an intense desire to tear it up. For a moment or two he could do nothing but give vent to disconnected ejaculations and abominable oaths.

"His 'at, curse him! Then he's in 'ere along of us for the next twelve days!" And then words seemed to fail him in order to express the full force of his disgust and rage. He viciously threw Sam's offending hat back on to the bunk, and vacantly stared out of the open port-hole at the deep blue waves with their snowy fringes of curling foam.

CHAPTER IV.

When Sneat and Josiah had carried off the casket from Jack's room under cover of the alarm caused by the cane fire, they had noticed that the box was unopened, and the same uncertainty regarding the value of its contents puzzled and annoyed them as it had done Jack. During their precipitate flight from the scene of the theft, and their hurried ride across the island to Rougeville, they had not had time even to attempt to break open the mysterious package. In the night spent on board the sloop going to Trinidad they had wasted tremendous efforts in attempts to open it, and had been exceedingly mortified to find that the strength of the locks and hinges was such as to resist all their endeavours to force them open with the bare assistance of their knives. They had not dared to call in the help of any of the crew of the sloop,

or even to borrow a hatchet with which they might have broken open the tantalising casket, fearing that if its contents proved to be of the fabulous value which they had reason to expect, there might be considerable risk in exposing the treasure to the cupidity of the four negroes who formed the crew of the little vessel.

Even during the two hours of their stay in Trinidad they had been unable to open the package so as to ascertain the value of their prize. Sneat had taken it into his head that the police might have been warned by telegraph of the theft by the authorities of Grenadilla, and he was determined to place as great a distance between himself and that island as possible.

He had accordingly hurried Josiah on board the steamer that was bound for Barbadoes with all speed, leaving the verification of the contents of the casket to some future moment when they might be more safe from the fear of capture.

It may be considered that Sandy did not display a natural amount of eagerness to discover the value of his robbery at the earliest possible moment. Sneat, however,

was the master thief and the leading spirit in the enterprise. The same doubts had assailed him as to the value of the casket as had troubled its rightful owner, and he really was exceedingly eager to find out whether the box contained a great treasure or not. Had he been sure of it, he would most probably have formed some plan for obtaining possession of the little chest without the assistance of any one else; but when taking Josiah into partnership Sneat had an ulterior motive.

He was anxious for many reasons to leave Grenadilla, and was eager to get back to England. He might possibly have done so honestly by working his passage home on board some ship as a sailor; but this suited neither his inclinations nor his plans. Josiah had agreed to find the money necessary for the transport of the casket to Barbadoes or Trinidad, and during their flight from Grenadilla, Sneat had calculated that there was no reason why the black man should not enable him to return to England in ease and comfort. This Josiah could be easily induced to do if he were lured on by uncertainty as to the contents

of the casket, and, in fact, once in England, Sneat thought it would go very hard with him if he could not give the unfortunate Josiah the slip and get safely away somewhere so as to enjoy the sole possession of the casket and its contents.

Even should it happen to contain no treasure at all, an advantage would still remain to him, for he would have been enabled to return to England at Josiah's expense with but little effort on his part. If, on the contrary, the casket had been opened at Trinidad or at Barbadoes and found valueless, Josiah would have returned alone to Grenadilla, and Sneat would have found himself stranded and penniless.

It accordingly came about that at the time of the unwelcome discovery of Bret's presence on board the steamer as the fourth occupant of their cabin, Sneat was quite as much in ignorance of the value of the little iron chest as either Sam Bret or Jack Moresby. He was however none the less keen about retaining possession of it, and, indeed, now that such dangers surrounded it, he felt he would run ten thousand risks

rather than give it up. He was now concentrating all his ingenuity and cunning in order to devise some plan by which the possibility of defeat should be reduced to a minimum.

Sam had been quite satisfied with the effect which his presence had produced on his two opponents, and a few moments after their precipitate retreat from the saloon he followed in that direction. Noiselessly stepping up to their cabin door, he listened for an instant, and was just in time to hear the volley of oaths with which Sneat had greeted the discovery of the hat which had attracted Josiah's attention. Not wishing at that moment to intrude upon them, he withdrew to the end of the passage, and from a dark corner kept a sharp look-out on the door lest the two thieves should make an attempt to surreptitiously remove the deal box or its contents. During a good half-hour he remained on the watch, but neither of the men emerged from the cabin. Once or twice Sam, wondering what they might be about, crept noiselessly up to the door and listened intently. They were evidently

still there and engaged in most interesting conversation, for the young mulatto, though unable to make out the purport of the confabulation, distinctly heard Sneat's low and monotonous tones now and then querulously interrupted by Josiah's fat voice. Sam would have given worlds to know the nature of the plot which was evidently being hatched, but their conversation was pitched in such a low tone that only a stray word here and there reached his ears. At last the ill-assorted pair made up their minds to leave the cabin, and Sneat, closely followed by Josiah, slunk along the passage and went up on deck, probably in order to ascertain whether Jack Moresby was also on board as well as his overseer.

Sam also went on deck and sat himself down in a somewhat secluded spot, where he might reflect undisturbed over the state of affairs, and ponder over the best means to be taken for circumventing his two opponents. There was a delightful breeze blowing right ahead which just ruffled the broad blue expanse of the ocean, and the steamer was speeding through the water at

a rate which would soon cause the low-lying coast of Barbadoes to disappear like a hazy cloud behind the distant horizon.

The ship was in the midst of a vast solitude, and yet the air was full of sounds that rang out sharply and clearly. The sailor's voices, the patter of the steps on the deck, the rattling of chains and the flapping of ropes sounded strangely distinct, and gave one the impression of being on some atom of the earth's surface which had somehow got adrift and was sailing all alone into limitless space.

For the first time since his separation from Jack a feeling of loneliness took possession of Sam. He felt half-afraid of the magnitude of the undertaking into which he had, almost despite himself, been drawn, and he could hardly help shuddering at the thought that one single false move on his part would probably suffice to ruin for ever all Moresby's chances of ever re-entering into possession of the stolen casket or of the immense fortune which it was supposed to contain. However he struggled manfully with these budding fears, and pluckily set to work to concoct

some plan which would result in the discomfiture of Sneat and his black friend.

Several projects presented themselves to him, but unfortunately each one seemed to be deficient in some vital point; and he was wishing for the fiftieth time that Jack Moresby had been in his place, when his cogitations were suddenly interrupted by the sight of Sneat and Josiah picking their way among the bags and boxes which still littered that part of the deck. They were evidently coming towards him, and Sam Bret instantly prepared for action.

"There ain't no use in behavin' as if we was all strangers to each other, is there, Mr. Bret?" began Sandy Sneat as he approached. While addressing Sam he assumed an air of unconcern, which, however, was rather belied by a certain amount of hesitation in his speech and by a nervous fumbling of his long hooked fingers at one of the buttons of his brand-new coat.

Sam looked at him right between the eyes, and answered in a decidedly uncompromising manner—

"Oh, I know you well enough, Sandy Sneat—and your black pal there too, for

the matter of that! And, as it seems that we are going to share the same cabin during the voyage, I expect we'll know a good deal more about each other before we get to Southampton."

Sneat was apparently not going to be choked off by a cold reception, for he took a seat on the bench which Sam was occupying, while the unfortunate Josiah, looking the picture of misery, deposited his obese body on the other side of his confederate, at the same time nodding a sickly look of recognition at the overseer.

"Yes, rather odd, isn't it, Mr. Bret, that we should find ourselves all together like this, on board the same ship," observed Sandy. "You set on your travels rather unexpected like, didn't you?"

Sam considered that a solitary monosyllable was about all that was necessary as an answer, so he merely said, "Yes," in a somewhat interrogative tone; and then leisurely proceeded to fill and light his pipe.

Sandy was considerably annoyed at Sam's taciturnity, and seemed evidently puzzled to know what he ought to say next.

Observing, however, that one of his shoe-laces was untied, he crossed his knees and repaired the irregularity in his toilette. Josiah, who was sitting in stolid silence, with his fleshy black hands demurely crossed on his ample black waistcoat, could not repress a deep sigh as he looked at Sneat's new boots, and he thought once more of the money which had been extracted from his narrow pocket to pay for them and sundry other accessories which Sandy had lavishly treated himself to at his partner's expense.

The bow having finally been tied to Sneat's satisfaction, he broke the silence which was becoming oppressive, by observing; "You don't seem over chatty, I must say, and considerin' that we all three comes from the same little place, I think we needn't be'ave as if we ain't never seen one another before."

"Yes, the paths of the ungodly are full of strange ways!" piously and irrelevantly observed Josiah, casting up his eyes to the streamer fluttering at the top of the mast.

Sneat treated this inaccurate quotation with marked disdain, and continued:

"I s'pose now, you left Mr. Moresby in

Grenadilla, didn't you, and he sent you on some business of his to England?"

"Mr. Moresby's not on board this ship, if that's what you want to know," answered Sam, who guessed that the information he was giving, was no news to his questioner. "And I'm taking a little trip to England for the benefit of my health, you know," he added, looking Sneat full in the face. "My medical adviser said that there was something wrong with one of the holes in my gizzard; he said, that what I wanted was a long sea voyage, with some pleasant company, and all that; and he said besides, that I was to be sure and put aside all cares and worries, and take any amount of interest in my fellow-passengers; find out all about 'em; where they were going to, and why, etc.; and that's what I'm going to do"; and Sam Bret suddenly turned round and looked full in the face of poor Josiah, who smiled a sickly meaningless smile, and cast a desperate glance of mute appeal for aid and protection to his partner.

Sam was getting into the spirit of the thing, and now that the ice was broken, his nervousness and fears had almost

vanished, and he was quite eager for the fray.

"We're travelling for our 'ealth too," presently observed Sneat; "the air of Grenadilla was too relaxing for me and my poor friend there is afraid of getting dropsy, so he's going to the best doctor we can find in London."

"Got much luggage with you? it didn't look to me as if the cabin was chock full of trunks belonging to you, except for that heavy deal box under your bunk," remarked Sam in a meaning manner, while he crossed his legs and took a long pull at his pipe.

For a moment Sneat made no answer; he seemed to be nerving himself up for something, and he shifted his feet uneasily. But suddenly he turned full round, and faced Sam squarely—

"Now, look 'ere, what's the use of all this shilly-shallying? You knows as well as we do what we're 'ere for, and I knows darned well what you're 'ere for too. It ain't no good beatin' about the bush like this 'ere, and I'm going to be square with you. We've got that blessed iron box, and what's more, we're going to keep it. We

know besides that you're on the track, Sam Bret, but you ain't got no chance; you can't show that you've got any more right to that there box than we 'ave; but we've got a 'old on it, and possession is nine points of the law! I knows that well enough. Besides, now, what could you gain by kickin' up a row? I don't want to 'urt your feelings, but all the same, you knows darned well that people wouldn't believe a man of your colour a bit more than they would me."

"Wouldn't they?" asked Sam.

"No, they wouldn't, and you knows it too. Suppose you kick up a row, what 'ud you gain? There would be the devil's own bother about it; the skipper, the peelers, and the beak would get a 'old of it, and nobody would get anything in the end. Mind you—I knows 'ow it was got, and I knows the law about money that's dug up! Neither you nor Mr. Moresby ain't got no better right to claim it than I 'ave."

"*We* have," mildly corrected Josiah.

"We've, then," surlily acquiesced Sneat.

Sam had an inkling of what was coming next, but wishing to have his mind set at rest on a certain point, observed:

"Yes, but you forget that the things in that casket can easily be traced, and I'm very sure that Mr. Moresby would very much rather that they went to the beaks or to the Crown or whoever it is, rather than to the beggars who have robbed him as you have!" Bret hoped to ascertain from the answer, whether the casket had been opened or not.

"Well, I'll tell you the truth," said Sandy, who saw no reason for withholding it. "We 'aven't yet opened the darned box, but we've shook it precious 'ard, and the things what's inside makes a fine rattle, I can tell yer; we 'oped to 've been able to open it on board the ship, quietly, some night in our cabin; but now they've gone and put some other bloke beside you along of us, and if he was to 'ear us rasping away at a small iron chest, he'd begin axing questions, and most likely blab it all over the ship."

There was silence for a moment. Sam determined to say nothing, knowing well that Sneat had not nearly finished saying what he intended to divulge. Then Josiah thinking the occasion appropriate, broke in

with a biblical quotation, which he considered would fit the case.

"My heart is heavy laden, and—" when he was rudely interrupted by Sneat, ordering him to "stow that there rot," and accompanying the intimation with the epithet of "Black ass."

Sneat then turned round and faced the overseer. "Look 'ere, Bret," said he in a confidential manner, "what pay do you get for that overseering job at Palm Vale?"

"Seven pounds a month and my keep. It's pay such as you'll never get," answered the young mulatto.

Sneat gave a sort of snigger, then whistled, looked fixedly over the bold blue water, at the distant horizon, and said in a low monotonous tone: "I think it ain't no profit fighting over this job, mate; seven pounds a month and wittles ain't going to make you a Rothschild no how, not if you live to be a hundred. Palm Vale 's going to be sold, I know it for a fact; where'll you be then?"

Sam made no answer, guessing what was coming next.

"Look 'ere, Bret, let's square this, Josiah

and me, of course, would much rather you wasn't on our track, as you are; but, on the other side, we are well able to take care of our own, even if there was two thousand overseers on our track, wouldn't we, Josiah?"

The black man thus called upon, answered far more sturdily than his fears warranted; "No, I wouldn't care."

"Well," continued Sneat, "that's so, but—all the same, as you *are* on our track, and may cause us some unpleasantness, we'd rather 'ave you as a friend than as a henemy. Look 'ere, we're ready to let you share with us in the contents of the box, if you will prove to us that you're ready to chuck over your boss and act on the square. There's thousands and thousands in that 'ere box, I'll lay my life, and when it's opened we'll all be as rich as you like. Well! what say, mate?"

Sam, although rather expecting something of the sort, was nevertheless considerably astonished at the proposal, and could hardly believe that the rascal was in earnest. His first impulse was to knock the man down, for daring to make such

an offer, but second thoughts showed him a wiser plan. In a couple of seconds his mind was made up.

He would accept the thief's proposal, and participate in the booty. Sneat had been quite right in saying that nothing could be gained by "kicking up a row." Sam remembered how often Jack Moresby had impressed upon him the necessity for keeping the whole matter a secret from the authorities, and for that reason had expressly refrained from employing the police in preventing the flight of the robbers.

If he refused to agree to Sneat's offer, Sam at once saw that all efforts to circumvent the designs of the two men would be reduced to keeping a sharp watch on their movements during the whole voyage; this would be an easy, though by no means pleasant task, as he would have to be constantly on his guard, lest they should attempt to cause his sudden disappearance and relieve themselves of his unwelcome presence, by heaving him over the side on a dark night. He was not so much afraid of this, however, but what caused him most anxiety, was the thought that he would be

unable, single handed, to prevent the two men from leaving the ship at Southampton, when most probably they and the casket would disappear for ever from his view, and all hope of recovering the treasure, on which so much depended, would be for ever lost. On the other hand, if he pretended to acquiesce in Sneat's proposition, and managed to gain the man's confidence, he would have numberless opportunities for keeping a strict guard on the treasure, and many more chances of ultimately getting sole possession of it.

After a few instants' reflection, he gave Sneat his answer. He told the man that he could not help thinking that he was doing rather a dirty thing towards his employer, who had always behaved very liberally towards him, but, "after all," he continued, "it's every man for himself in these days, eh, Sneat? and the thing is too good to refuse; so you can just consider I've a third share in that casket."

"Oh, that's all very well, my good fellow, you know, but I must 'ave something more than your bare word. Bare words don't pass for much with me and my

pal, we like something more substantial. What are you going to do to prove your 'Boney fidey,' as them lawyer chaps say?"

It was a puzzler, and Sam hardly knew what to say. It was of great importance that he should gain, as much as possible, the confidence of the man; otherwise, there would be no advantage. He still had in his pocket a few pounds out of old Quamina's legacy which remained to him after paying the passage money; and he thought that a portion of this sum might profitably be invested in securing the confidence of his two partners.

"Well, Sneat," began Sam, "I don't quite know what I can say to prove that I mean to act squarely with you, but I'll tell you what I'm ready to do. Just before leaving me, Mr. Moresby gave me forty pounds for my expenses in looking after you two and the chest; half of this money I paid away to the purser for my passage. Here's the remaining twenty quid. To prove that I'm entirely with you in this spec, you can take charge of my money and keep it altogether if ever you find I'm trying to humbug. I don't think I can say

fairer than that. But on the other hand, Sneat, I know that you are a pretty slippery customer, and we haven't been on intimate terms long enough for me to be able to trust you entirely, so you must promise to have the chest opened directly we get to Southampton, and divide whatever is in it without any more fuss."

"That's fair enough; and I'll close with you on that," said Sneat, as his unwashed hand closed over the money. "And now, that being settled, let's go and have a whet over the bargain. Old Smuttynose here will stand treat this time."

Poor Josiah groaned very audibly as he followed the other two men down to the bar. His turn to treat indeed! Ever since he had joined Sneat in the unfortunate venture, it had been, every time, his turn to stand treat, and now matters were getting worse, for there were two to be treated instead of one. He was far from satisfied at the turn which matters were taking and trusted Sam Bret not a whit more than he did Sandy Sneat. He had dire misgivings as to the result of this third partnership, and devoutly he wished,

for the hundredth time, that he had never listened to Sneat's representations. He well knew that, in the present case, there was not a spark of that honour which is supposed sometimes to be found among thieves, and he was very suspicious of the alacrity with which the overseer had thrown over his employer and closed with Sneat's offer. It had been arranged by the two confederates during their close confabulation in the cabin, that the best way to hoodwink Sam Bret would be to offer him a share in the treasure. This share was of course to be merely imaginary, and Sneat had assured Josiah that there would not be the slightest difficulty in giving Sam Bret the slip as soon as the ship stopped at Southampton.

Sneat, when concocting the plan with the black, had had considerable doubts as to the way in which Bret would receive his proposal, and though strongly suspecting the real motives which had induced the overseer to become their confederate, he was, nevertheless, much surprised by Bret entrusting his money to him as a guarantee of good faith. He only thought him the

greater fool for it, however, and faithfully promised himself that Sam should see no more of his twenty pounds than he would of the contents of the casket.

Owing to the amicable arrangement into which the three men had entered, matters now proceeded with comparative smoothness. The presence of the fourth man in their cabin, however, caused them considerable annoyance. He was a raw young Barbadian lad, leaving home for the first time, and though perfectly harmless in most respects, it was absolutely necessary that he should be got rid of in some way or other.

CHAPTER V.

SHORTLY after the arrangement for sharing the contents of the casket had been made, the three men had held a long conference on the ways and means to be adopted for discovering, as soon as possible, the value of their prize. For many reasons, it was imperative that the case should be opened before the ship arrived at Southampton. It had been a comparatively easy matter for Sneat and Josiah to evade the Customs authorities at Trinidad and Barbadoes, but such a course would be almost impossible on arrival in England. The Custom House people would insist on knowing the contents of the box, and the package would be opened in a manner which would necessarily cause suspicion, and attract the utmost publicity. Such an eventuality must, at any cost, be avoided, and it seemed most difficult to find a way out of

the dilemma. It was, however, finally agreed upon, that means must be found for opening the casket on board the ship, and before their arrival at Southampton.

In the first place, it was absolutely essential that the fourth passenger should be induced to vacate the cabin, so as to leave the three confederates free to make their investigations undisturbed. Sneat took this task upon himself and promised that, before forty-eight hours were over, the young Barbadian would have evacuated the cabin of his own accord.

Sandy was as good as his word. He forthwith commenced a series of the hundred and one petty annoyances which any unpleasant fellow-passenger can so easily inflict on another. The unfortunate young man soon found the cabin intolerable. His clothes were never to be found; his toothbrush was always on the floor; his boots in his bed, while his timid complaints and objections, were met by such violent language and blood-thirsty threats, that in two or three days the poor fellow was compelled to implore the purser to find him room in some other part of the ship. Sneat

was delighted at the success of his manœuvres, and as the moment approached for the opening of the mysterious casket, the three men's excitement reached boiling point.

Sam had, in the meantime, so far ingratiated himself with Sneat, that the latter's suspicions had almost disappeared, and he had, once or twice, confidentially informed the young overseer of his intention to give the unfortunate black man the slip, as soon as they set foot on English soil. The treasure would then only have to be divided into two parts, instead of three, and so entirely had Sam wormed himself into Sneat's confidence, that the man was almost reconciled to the idea of honestly sharing with Jack's overseer.

The Barbadian passenger had hardly cleared the last of his traps out of the cabin when the three confederates determined to delay no longer in making the first effort to open the innocent-looking package which lay under Sneat's bunk. It was after lunch, and they hoped to devote the whole afternoon to the satisfaction of the curiosity with which they were consumed.

A hammer, chisel and a small saw were soon obtained from the ship's carpenter, and after carefully locking the cabin door, the deal case was hauled out into the middle of the cabin. In a couple of minutes the cover was wrenched off, and after removing a considerable amount of straw packing, the mysterious iron casket lay exposed to view.

Sam recognised it at once, and his mind rushed back to that moment so full of intense excitement when he and Jack Moresby had first caught sight of it, lying at the bottom of the rotten old chest, which they had so laboriously dug up and transported to Jack's bedroom at Palm Vale.

It was promptly lifted out of the deal case and deposited on the floor.

"You hear the things jangling?" asked Sneat, as he raised the casket and shook it. "There's more valuables in this 'ere box than any of us ever saw in his darned life —I'll take my oath!"

"Come on, there's no use guessing; let's open it and make sure," answered Sam, who could hardly restrain his impatience. "Here, Josiah, you pass me that hatchet,

and I'll see if I can't bust the blessed thing open."

Now that the supreme moment had arrived, Sneat's cupidity was increased tenfold, and he bitterly repented having managed so badly as to be compelled to share the booty with two others. Suddenly snatching the hatchet out of Sam's hands, he put a foot on the top of the casket.

"Now look 'ere—both of you—We've sworn to be pals over this job, I know; but I b'lieve I've made a darned ass of myself about it. If I 'adn't been a blithering fool, I would have managed to keep it all to myself. As it is, however, share and share alike is all rot!"

"What?" exclaimed Sam, instinctively grasping a chisel. "What's that you say? sharing's all rot—eh? None of that, you swab!" he continued, jumping to his feet in a threatening attitude.

"Of course, it is," replied Sneat, taking a firmer grasp of his hatchet and placing his back against the cabin door. "Of course, it's rot! What 'ave you done, to share alike with me in all this? Haven't I brought the box here? You thought

yourself mighty smart to 'ave tracked us right 'ere, I dare say, but what if I say now that the box ai'n't to be opened, and that it's mine, and that neither of you will ever 'ave a smell at what it 'olds?"

"What! neither of us?" exclaimed the black man, whose greed, becoming intensely aroused, gave him more pluck than he had ever had in his life before. "I like that, I do. You say, *you* brought the chest here! Oh, holy Jacob! how the hell could you have got it here if it hadn't been for my money—eh? Who paid for the sloops and the passage and everything? Look here, Sandy Sneat, if you're going to do the thief with me, I'll go straight to the captain now, and tell him the whole thing. I'll go —Gorramighty bless me, I will."

The three men stood, for a moment, glaring silently at each other. Sneat felt like a miser who saw two-thirds of his hoarded treasures slipping from his grasp. Sam Bret, enraged at the bad faith of the ruffian, could hardly restrain himself from burying his chisel in the man's neck. Greed for the possession of the still unseen treasures had overpowered him, and he felt

impelled to defend, at all costs, the wealth which the casket probably contained. For the moment he forgot that he was only acting for another, and that the third share, which he was so determined to have, would belong, not to him, but to his master. The rough side of the mulatto's nature had taken the upper hand, and all was forgotten save that the mysterious iron box lay there at last within his reach, and that another was trying to thwart him of his fair share.

"Shut up, you brutes, both of you, do you hear!" he exclaimed, wrenching the hatchet out of Sneat's hand by a dexterous movement. "Do you want the whole ship to know about this? If you go on with that infernal row, we'll have a crowd at the door in a minute. Shut up, I say. As for you, you skunk! it's just what I expected of you; you're a dirty common thief, and I'd rather trust Josiah here, nigger though he is, than half-a-dozen blokes like you. Now it's come to the pinch you want to back out of our bargain? Eh? Well, I'll tell you what it is: either you stick to what we arranged and divide fairly whatever is

in that box, now and at once, or I go with Josiah to the skipper and blow on the whole show! See how much you'll get of it then! Before another half hour you'll find yourself in irons, and on the road to gaol in Southampton. You're the dirtiest, meanest——"

"Who said I wasn't going to give you a share?" interrupted Sneat, who, seeing how determined were the two men, had begun to resign himself to the inevitable. "You beggars take my 'ead off before I even said a word."

"You said you wouldn't share with us," retorted the negro.

"I never said that, you nigger! I said that share and share alike was rot, that's what I said."

"Well, it isn't rot!" returned Sam, kneeling on the floor beside the box. It's got to be as I say, you hear, or else I swear to do as I said! This box has got to be opened now and here, right off. We'll each take our shares, and then be hanged to you both!"

"Devil a bit," exclaimed Sneat, excitedly. "Sooner than let go now what's inside

that there box, I'll open the door of the cabin and yell out for help. I'll swear you tried to rob me, and we'll see then who'll be in irons, Master Bret! Every one knows we didn't come aboard together, and the skipper would take my word before he'd listen to half-a-dozen snuff-and-butter coloured blokes like you!"

"Would you like to try?" retorted Sam.

"Yes, I would, sooner than part now with any of what's inside that chest, and that I'll stick to. Oh, you think yourself blessed smart, I dare say, Sam Bret, but I see through your little game. Suppose there's gold, and silver, and 'eaps of jewels in that there box, you'd take your third out of 'em now, you'd go straight to the skipper, show them to him and make out as they was all yours, and that me and Josiah was the thieves, eh! Oh, I see it all, plain as a pikestaff, but you don't catch me like that, my chicken. Oh, no!" he continued, seating himself on the top of the casket, and folding his arm, "I'll do what I promised, although I was a darned fool to promise as much as I did, but, 'owever, as it is, I'll stick to it. But you

can make your mind heasy on one point, and that is, that neither of you two is going to get a 'alfpenny out of this 'ere, until we're safe out of this ship, and the things whatever they is, is turned into rhino, I ain't such a fool as all that. I'll give you each a share, as I said——"

"A third," exclaimed both Sam and the black man.

"Well, a third," muttered Sneat, sulkily, "of the value when we're safe 'ome, and if you say any more about it, I shan't 'ave the box opened at all on board the ship. I'll manage without you both if you 'umbug me too much. However, don't let's 'ave any more of this 'ere rot, and let's open the chest and see what's in it."

Sam seeing that there was nothing to be got by further altercation, restrained himself and set to work to help the other two men in opening the casket. Sneat was still master of the situation, and the overseer feared that all might yet be lost by an open rupture.

On the one hand, he knew that it would be much more difficult to keep an efficient watch over Sneat when the treasure, what-

ever it turned out to be, should become more portable by its removal from its bulky envelope; but on the other hand, if he insisted on a partition of the booty, the tie between him and the two men would be dissolved, leaving them free to carry off undisturbed two-thirds of the prize. This did not suit Sam's views, and he thought he would have more chances of ultimately obtaining possession of the entire treasure, if it were left for some time longer undivided.

Although completely covered with rust and corroded in many places, the little chest was of immense strength and solidity. Some minutes were spent in scraping the red rust off the edges and off those parts where it was most probable the locks would be found. The casket was oblong in shape and bound round with carved iron clamps in every conceivable part. Studded with knobs and originally covered with curiously delicate arabesques, it must have been a very perfect specimen of the locksmith's work of the seventeenth century. Finally, after considerable search, a slight crevice was noticed which appeared to go right

round the box. Repeated blows with hammer and chisel were administered on this crack, but without any palpable result. Irritated by this check to their impatience, the three men redoubled their efforts and, almost regardless of the fact that the noise might attract some of the other passengers, showers of well-directed blows, by all sorts of tools, were rained on the mysterious box.

At last a heavy blow at an interstice in one of the corners performed the needful, and the lid of the casket was quickly wrenched aside by feverish fingers.

A hoarse exclamation of baffled disappointment escaped the three men, when they found that the iron casket was only the outer receptacle which contained the objects of their quest. The rusty iron cover wrenched back on its hinges, disclosed to their view, among a mass of evil-smelling rags and rubbish—which possibly had once been valuable parchments—a small open case, strongly bound and clamped with iron. In an instant three pairs of eager hands lifted the case out of the iron coffer. Two or three well-directed blows at its curious, old-fashioned

lock burst it open, and a cry of greedy surprise and astonishment escaped the hot dry throats of the three men, as the contents of the box at last met their eager eyes.

The gratification of their curiosity was realised in an even greater degree than they had dared to hope, and Sneat's crooked fingers at once made a grasp at the glittering objects which almost filled the rusty casket. The excitement of the three men was too intense for words, and their stertorous breathing alone showed how powerful were their emotions.

Each instinctively clutched the sides of the case as though fearful of sudden treachery from the others, and as each man almost unconsciously pulled the rusty edges in his own direction, it was not without difficulty that the casket was finally overturned, and its glittering contents turned out into a towel spread on the ground. As the priceless treasures fell into a heap, an errant ray of sunlight poured through the narrow porthole, and flashed its rays right on the glistening mass of jewels. Exquisite sparkles of

green, crimson, and golden light shot up from the little mound, and gave it the appearance of having been suddenly set on fire.

Watching each other like cats, the three men scattered over the towel the precious articles which formed the little mound, and they broke into exclamations of wonder and delight as each jewel was held up for admiration. There were necklaces of large Brazilian diamonds which, despite their uncouth setting, glistened like stars with flashes of exquisite fire.

Some of the stones were of immense size, and when held up to the sunlight in the uncouth, trembling fingers of one of the excited men, looked like gigantic glow-worms struggling in a ruthless grasp, and seemed to throw flashes of fire into the very corners of the cabin.

There were strings of lovely pearls of wondrous size and shape, but whose delicate sheen had become somewhat dulled and impaired by their long seclusion in the darkness of the buried casket. Rubies and emeralds, more or less roughly cut and unset, lay here and there scattered all over

the towel. Some were in rough silver settings, cut and twisted out of shape, and telling a tale of sacred vessels and reliquaries hacked to pieces for the sake of the precious stones with which they were encrusted. Each jewel mutely told its story of robbery, violence, and murder. Far away towns on the Spanish Main ravished by the bold buccaneers; churches sacked and red-robed priests slain on the steps of the altar, vainly attempting to defend their sacred treasures from the sacrilegious hands of bandits.

The pearls and diamonds told of olive-cheeked raven-haired maidens from whose ears and breasts the jewels had been ruthlessly torn, with perhaps a licentious kiss to make the outrage less or worse. Fat Spanish galleons, laden with the gold and silver of Mexico, overhauled by the pursuing pirate schooner, and forced to disgorge their precious plunder to the ravisher, while their unhappy crews walked the plank under the sooty skull and cross-bones.

Little, however, did the three men see of these mind pictures, as they crouched gloating over the wondrous treasures.

Sneat's clawlike fingers closed and relaxed spasmodically over the jewels, as though he were bathing his hands in their exquisite lights, while his parched lips murmured unmeaning oaths and imprecations. His brows were darkly knit—he seemed to be meditating a plot of ferocious villainy, and a blood-thirsty gleam lurked in his eyes as he furtively glanced at his companions. The negro was sitting cross-legged like a child, with an almost imbecile expression on his fleshy features. His fat, black hands toyed with a necklace of pear-shaped pearls, and he crooned softly to himself in unintelligible "patois."

Sam Bret, when the first burst of excitement and wonder had moderated a little, had immediately set to work to mentally value the mass of gems which lay on the rough towel.

In his whole life he had hardly seen more than half-a-dozen diamonds together, and as to pearls and rubies, their value was quite unknown to him. Of the cost of diamonds, he had, however, a very fair idea, more especially as he had frequently heard the story of the famous Moresby jewels which

had been carried off so long ago by the buccaneers. Although he guessed that those particular gems must form but a comparatively small proportion of the mass of stones which the casket had contained, still he could not refrain from picking out the finest string of diamonds as being those that had once belonged to Jack's grandmother. He knew that those jewels would be more acceptable than all the gems put together.

If the worst came to the worst, and a division of the booty could not be prevented, Sam determined that most of the diamonds should at all events fall to his share. Josiah, he calculated, would probably be ignorant of the comparative value of the different stones, and would most likely be satisfied with the more showy gems, such as the rubies and emeralds, but Sneat was no such ignoramus, and would be certain to cavil at such a division. Bret, however, was anticipating considerably, for the partition of the booty seemed still very distant.

"Well, here goes," said Sneat, taking up the corners of the towel and shaking the

jewels together into a heap into the middle, "I am going to put the beauties safe away now. You've both seen 'em, and neither you nor me ever saw sich a sight in our blessed lives before."

"What are you going to do with them?" asked Sam, who was exceedingly reluctant to lose sight of the treasure.

"Do with 'em! Why I'm going to make 'em up into a tidy little parcel, and you can bet your life that it'll never leave my side pocket until we get 'ome, and can sell 'em without danger of being copped."

"I want my share now," whined Josiah, clutching at the towel.

"Oh, yer do, do yer? well, you ain't agoin' to get it, my black friend, no more than Bret 'ere. What are you both afeard of? You knows I can't walk ashore, and you knows I must 'ave the things on me when I leave the ship, so what are you in a funk about? Besides, what I've said I'll stick to, so there"—he snapped out, carefully rolling up the jewels in the towel—"I'm going to be your banker, see, and the diamonds is as safe inside my waistcoat as if they was in the Bank of England."

The statement was open to more than doubt, but though Sam Bret was entirely of that opinion, he knew that to argue the point would be worse than useless. Even now he could hardly realize that the mystery of the casket's contents had at last been cleared up, and that its realization had been so very much more magnificent than the wildest hopes could imagine. The jewels were certainly of almost inestimable value, and even should he be so unfortunate as to obtain no more than his third share of them, Sam reflected that even that amount, if sold, would be more than enough to clear away for ever all Jack Moresby's troubles. Bret was determined not to give up the idea of ultimately obtaining the whole treasure, and yet he looked forward with dread to the arrival of the steamer in Southampton.

As has been already said, he had never been out of the West Indies, and he feared that his utter ignorance of railways, telegraphs, hotels, and all the other wonders of European civilisation would hamper him considerably in his determination never to leave Sneat for one moment, so long as he

retained possession of the jewels. The young mulatto had, however, great confidence in his good luck, and as fortune had hitherto so much favoured him, he determined not to worry himself unnecessarily until the critical moment arrived. He earnestly hoped that he would be able to effect a meeting with Jack very shortly after his arrival. It was essential that the jewels should not be disposed of before he could communicate with his master, as, once sold, any attempt to recover them without paying their full value would be almost hopeless.

The steamer was timed to arrive at Southampton thirteen days after its departure from Barbadoes; on the ninth day, however, an accident happened to one of the principal pieces of machinery in the engine-room, and the vessel's pace was reduced from fourteen knots an hour to little over seven. The injury happened to be irreparable, and instead of the steamer arriving at Southampton at the appointed date, she came in four days behind time.

This accident, to most passengers untoward, filled Sam Bret with joy. He

calculated that if, as he expected, Jack had gone on to New York by the *Sword Fish*, he must have arrived at that port about twelve days after leaving Barbadoes, and by immediately transhipping on to one of the Ocean Greyhounds, he would reach Liverpool not more than a day or two after the arrival of the disabled Royal Mail steamer at Southampton. This fortunate mishap would consequently enable Bret and Jack Moresby to arrive almost simultaneously in London, and should fortune favour them, communication might be established almost immediately.

It may well be imagined that from the moment the shores of England loomed into view, no shadow could have followed Sandy Sneat more closely than did Sam Bret. Not a moment was he out of his sight, and whether sleeping, walking, or eating, the overseer was never absent from the man's side for a single instant. Josiah too seemed to feel that the dangers and difficulties of the situation were arriving at a most critical point, and dire misgivings filled his anxious mind at the thought that they would soon be once more on dry land and

within easy reach of the law. He was in an agony of dread lest Jack Moresby should have set the English police in motion through the medium of the telegraph, and he seemed already to feel a policeman's clutch on his collar.

Nor was Sandy Sneat feeling one whit less anxious, though he did not allow his fears and discomposure to be so apparent as Josiah's. He knew that everything depended on the next few hours, and that once safely through the Custom-house and on the way to London, he would have but little to fear from any one. Several times during those last few hours of the journey he looked suspiciously and searchingly at Sam Bret, as if trying to penetrate his thoughts. He wondered whether the mulatto was playing him false, and felt considerable apprehension at the thought that Sam might very possibly be intending to hand him and Josiah over, together with the jewels, to the care of a couple of sturdy policemen, as soon as the ship cast anchor. Once or twice he vaguely hinted to Sam, in a feebly jocular manner, the possibility of such an event, but he failed

to gather much comfort from the overseer's answers.

Slowly and majestically the big steamer moved up the placid waters of the Solent, past the green undulating hills on the Isle of Wight, on the one side, and the wicked-looking round batteries which here and there raised their threatening heads out of the rippling wavelets on the other. The decks were covered with the eager passengers, who had been standing about ready dressed for landing for hours before. Surrounded by their respective heaps of packages, bags and bundles, each one feasted his eyes on the welcome sight of the dear old shores of England. Many there were who had not been home for years, and to them, at that moment, the long stretch of intervening time appeared to have melted away suddenly, and it seemed to them as if it were only a few weeks before that they had passed along those same verdant shores on their way to the bright unknown lands of the tropics. They vividly remembered the sad thoughts that had beset them when they had seen those hills and meadows fading away in the gloom behind them,

as their ship speedily carried them away towards pastures new. They remembered how their eyes were filled with tears at the thought of the dear ones whom they had last seen on the great grey wharf, waving their handkerchiefs high in the air, only ceasing now and then when the kerchiefs were needed to wipe away the tears which interfered with their last glimpses of the departing one. And now, at last, they were returning, fortunate or not as the case might be, but whether laden with riches, or poor as when they left, there was an all-pervading sense of delight as each headland came slowly into sight, bringing them nearer and nearer to the moment when they would set foot once more on the homely soil of dear old England.

It was a clear, bright January morning, cold and frosty, but wonderfully exhilarating. Every sound rang out sharp and crisp in the clear atmosphere, while the sun shone brightly and tipped with pale gold reflections each little wavelet that passed the ship.

Presently a sturdy little tender was descried cleaving its way fussily through the

blue waters towards the steamer, and gradually the little knot of men on its bridge became more and more distinct.

To Josiah, every man on board that tender was a possible detective, duly provided with the necessary warrant, and ready to pounce upon him the moment he set foot on the steamer's decks.

The sight of a couple of uniforms among them sent a cold shudder up his back, and as he noticed the group of upturned faces eagerly scanning the crowd of passengers on the Royal Mail ship, he could not divest himself of the idea that it was him they were looking after and trying to catch a glimpse of. His guilty fears never gave a thought to the probability that those searching glances were doing their best to distinguish some dear old friend or relative who was returning to the old country after weary years of absence. The dock agent and baggage-touts especially filled him with apprehension, for the way they peered amongst the crowd of passengers for likely customers, seemed to him to savour more than he liked of the manners and customs of the myrmidons of the law.

Very different were Sam Bret's feelings as he watched the tender approaching. He strained his eyes to the utmost in the endeavour to distinguish among its passengers the stalwart form of his employer. It was quite possible, owing to the delay caused by the breaking down of the engines, that Jack Moresby might already have arrived in England, and if that proved to be the case, Sam felt sure that the young planter's first move would be to come down to Southampton and meet the West Indian Mail. It need not be said how devoutly he wished that it might be so, but a very few moments showed that such hopes were futile.

When the little tender finally arrived alongside, and its passengers began to clamber up the companion-ladder into the ship, Josiah could stand it no longer, and he fled below to seek the welcome seclusion of his cabin. Here he was speedily rejoined by his partner in guilt, who also was feeling the very reverse of comfortable, and whose fears, though not so apparent, were almost as intense as those which troubled the black man. Sneat felt that the most

dangerous moment of the whole venture was approaching, for if Jack Moresby had, as was very likely, communicated with the English police, the ship would be immediately visited by detectives, and a very few minutes would settle the whole business.

Sam, as usual, was not far behind, and he was much amused as he noticed the nervous way that Sneat and his companion tumbled about the very few odds and ends which constituted the sum total of their baggage. Sam's luggage, as we know, was even less imposing, and when the feeble pretence of packing up could not longer in any way be kept up, he finally prevailed upon the two men to pluck up courage and to come on deck. Before leaving the cabin, however, Sam took the precaution of making sure of the whereabouts of the treasure, and refusing to accept Sneat's assurances, he insisted upon having the little package opened once more, so as to be quite sure that the diamonds and other jewels were properly accounted for. Two or three days before all the stones had been taken out of the towel in which they had been temporarily deposited, after the

opening of the casket, and they had been carefully packed up by the three men in a long, flat, brown paper parcel, which had been sewn up in the lining of Sandy Sneat's waistcoat.

Having satisfied himself regarding their safety, Sam was firmly resolved that nothing would induce him to lose sight of Sneat, for a single instant, until he had either obtained the sole possession of the treasure or had handed it over to the safe keeping of some other person.

CHAPTER VI.

It would be uninteresting to relate in detail how the three men at last left the ship, landed at Southampton, passed through the Custom-house without mishap, and finally settled themselves to spend their first day in England in a fifth-rate hotel near the docks. Sufficient to say that, as soon as Sandy Sneat found that the police had not been set on his track, and having passed safely through the hands of the Custom-house officials, his spirits rose with a bound, and he now looked upon himself as being in almost undisputed possession of the immense wealth which was lying snugly sewn up in the lining of his waistcoat.

So boisterously independent and offensive did he become, that Sam Bret was obliged two or three times to remind him, in no very gentle terms, that he was not the

only person interested in the venture, and during that day the two men on several occasions were very nearly coming to blows. Sam, in fact, was once reduced to threaten the intervention of the police, and it was as much as he could do to keep strict watch and ward over the unprincipled ruffian's actions.

His task, while on board ship, had been comparatively simple, owing to the fact that Sneat could not possibly escape him; but now on shore it was vastly different, and he well knew that if he relaxed his vigilance for a single moment, Sneat would disappear like a flash of lightning, and all hope of ultimately securing the treasure would be at an end. Bret was accordingly very anxious that they should proceed as soon as possible to London, where there would be many more chances of effecting a meeting with Jack Moresby, and Sneat on his side, being no less desirous for many reasons to push on to London, it was decided that they should start by an early train next morning.

In all these arrangements it may well be imagined that the third partner, Josiah,

was docility itself. The unfortunate man, since he first caught sight of the shores of England, had been quite dazed and helpless. His fears of falling into the clutches of the law almost more than counterbalanced his satisfaction at the prospect of an early partition of the booty. His dread, however, of the possible consequences of his remarkable venture did not prevent him from keeping the closest watch on the actions of his two confederates. He allowed neither of them to be out of his sight for a moment, and it was ludicrous to observe the craft and cunning with which he dodged their every footstep. His anxiety, moreover, was anything but diminished by the fact that the two men openly laughed at him and at his very apparent efforts to keep a strict watch over their movements. Several times during the day of their arrival, simply to tease him, they had openly expressed their intention of running away from him, and of leaving him helplessly stranded where he was, but they were always very careful, after baiting him cruelly for a few minutes, to remove any impression of foul play from his mind.

They well knew that Josiah might, at any moment, become a very dangerous foe, and that he could irretrievably ruin all their plans and prospects by the simple step of making a statement at the nearest police station. He was quite aware of his power; in fact, the project had once or twice entered his head, but the prospect of a share of that marvellous treasure, of which he had already had a glimpse, had hitherto proved strong enough to restrain any impulses in that direction, and he was resolved not to proceed to such a course until reduced to the last extremity.

It had been unanimously decided that it would be unwise to attempt to sell any of the jewels in Southampton, as there would be considerable danger, in such a comparatively small place, of attracting to them the attention of the police. All three men were consequently eager to find themselves in London, and even Josiah, who had never seen a railway in his life, found that the train which carried them up to the capital did not travel fast enough.

During the journey it was arranged that they should take up their quarters in a

lodging house which Sandy Sneat knew of old, and which was situated in a crowded busy part of London. He took them, in fact, to the dingy-looking tenement into which Jack Moresby had seen the trio disappear on the day of their fortunate meeting in the city.

It was a common low-class lodging-house not far from the docks, and frequented by all sorts of shady characters with whose avocations the proprietor evidently troubled himself little. Some years before, when Sandy Sneat had ostensibly followed at irregular periods the occupation of a sailor, he had been wont to occupy a room in this house, and he knew that it presented exactly the requirements which suited for the moment their present position.

For obvious reasons, the three men unanimously agreed that one room would be quite sufficient for all their wants. After a short interview with a slatternly hard-featured woman, reeking of gin, and who was apparently in charge of the house, they found themselves in possession of an unclean, dismal looking chamber on the third floor. A week's rent, amounting to a

small sum, was paid in advance, and, as usual, was produced, amidst the usual grumbling, from the pockets of Josiah.

The room had apparently only just been vacated by its last tenants, who had left behind them undoubted proof of the fact that cleanliness and decency were not among their conspicuous virtues. Two windows, with hardly a whole pane of glass between them, looked out into the street, and being three parts blocked by rags and bits of brown paper which had at various times been applied to cracks and holes. filtered but a small amount of daylight into the bare, untidy room. The furniture consisted only of a couple of rickety beds bearing malodorous mattresses of brown sacking, a couple of broken-down chairs, and in another corner a pile of dirty rags, which were probably intended to represent a third bed. Sneat and the mulatto naturally appropriated the two beds, leaving the rags to Josiah, who, too much overcome by all sorts of unhappy thoughts and fears, accepted it in silence, and heaved a sigh so deep that it sounded suspiciously like a groan.

Sam Bret, now that he had arrived in London, was much troubled in his mind respecting the best plans to be adopted in order to effect a meeting with Jack Moresby, or at all events to find out his whereabouts. The watch which he kept on Sneat's movements was not one whit more strict than the vigilance with which the other men followed his every action. Neither Sandy Sneat nor his companion trusted him in the smallest particular, and they strongly suspected that his apparent treachery to his master was not as genuine as it might be. They were entirely in each other's hands, however, and each one knew that it would only be a matter of common precaution and interest which would induce them to behave with even a degree of fairness and good faith towards each other.

Under the circumstances, it was accordingly almost impossible for Bret to attempt to obtain news from Jack's agents without allowing his companions to profit by any information which he might elicit. This being the case, he saw no other course open to him than to still further apparently betray the young planter, and proposing it

as a matter necessary for their common security, he suggested that they should all three go to Messrs. Saccherin, Proof & Co., who were the planter's agents in the city, in order to find out from them if they had any knowledge of Moresby's movements. His proposal was at first met with considerable suspicion by the other two, but he managed, after a good deal of argument, to overcome their objections, and the three men very shortly after their arrival proceeded together to Mincing Lane. We know already that Sam's visit to the agents did not afford him any information, and in fact the clerk to whom they addressed themselves had appeared surprised in the extreme on being asked whether Mr. Moresby was in London or not. The other two men, having kept themselves in the background, had not been noticed by the clerk, and he had consequently not informed Jack of the fact that the dark-coloured young man had been accompanied by two other persons when making inquiries concerning him.

Sam Bret was intensely disappointed at failing to obtain the information which he

was so anxious to get, and he lost himself in conjectures as to what had become of Jack. Over and over again he mentally calculated the time which it would have taken Moresby to get to London from Barbadoes, *viâ* New York, and he thought that if no mishap had occurred to him, Jack should, by rights, have arrived in England almost on the very day that he and his two companions had landed at Southampton.

The question of turning the jewels into money had now to be considered, and all objections on Sam's part, besides creating distrust, were put aside with a high hand. Sam did his best to place as many obstacles as possible in the way of parting with the jewels at an early date. He knew that once they went out of Sneat's possession, and the price paid for them, they would be hopelessly lost. So long as they remained under his eye, they were tolerably secure, and he fervently hoped that they might remain so until he and Jack could effect a communication and hit upon some satisfactory plans for getting sole possession of them.

Sandy, however, refused to be put off, even for a day, and his impatience to profit by the result of the successful robbery refused to be thwarted any longer. He was eager to make up for the many long years of misery and hardship which he had gone through since he was a boy, by a grand spell of wild extravagance, and he knew that even a third share of the sum which the jewels would realise, would place him in possession of more money than he had ever even dreamt of, and his impatience to enter upon this happy state of things chafed intensely at the few obstacles which still remained.

Josiah also was none the less anxious to arrive at a satisfactory termination of the whole affair, and although he could not calculate anything like the probable amount of what his share would be, he was very eager to get hold of it, whatever it might be, and faithfully he promised himself that he would never again be mixed up in any affair so risky and so complicated.

The matter of disposing of the jewels, however, was one which meant a large amount of trouble, care and risk. Sneat,

who was no novice in the business of turning stolen property into money, and knowing how many precautions it was necessary to take, was almost appalled by the importance of this last and most successful venture. He knew that in the case of diamonds and other jewels, such as those in his possession, the greatest caution would have to be used in parting with them. Although ignorant of their real value, he guessed that they represented several thousands of pounds, and it would accordingly be absurd for him to have resort to the pettifogging dishonest small dealers to whom he used to have recourse in former years. He knew that the capital possessed by the receivers of stolen goods who had had the advantage of his acquaintance was very trifling, and though they might be able to produce on the spot ten or fifteen pounds for a piece of ill-gotten property, worth five times as much, their means would be quite unable to cope with even the smallest stone which formed part of the splendid collection in his possession. It was accordingly necessary that some person similarly devoid of com-

mercial principles, but possessed of a respectable amount of capital, should be found, and through the medium of such a person the jewels might be gradually, and by gentle degrees, placed upon the market and turned into hard cash.

Sandy Sneat, although not even middle-aged, had had a large and varied experience from his childhood up, of all the shifts and devices which form part of the education of pickpockets, burglars, and such-like persons of interesting but questionable habits. Three or four years previously, in fact, he had been mixed up in a matter relating to an unceremonious visit paid to an old widow lady in the small hours of the night, which had brought him within a very appreciable distance of transportation for life; but his good star had enabled him to dodge the police successfully, and it was owing to this fact that Grenadilla had had the doubtful advantage of his sojourn in that simple island for so many years. He remembered now that while engaged in the venture above mentioned, he had been brought into contact with an old gentleman of the Hebraic persuasion, who was sup-

posed to have almost unlimited command of capital, and who was generally believed to double this wealth annually by means of important dealings with a number of gentlemen whose visits were usually paid to him after nightfall.

Sneat accordingly proposed on the morning of the day after their arrival in London, that they should at once proceed to the place where this old person generally arranged his transactions. After considerable time spent in arguments advanced by Sam Bret against any undue haste in disposing of the jewels, it was nevertheless finally decided that the first venture should at once be made with one of the smallest diamonds in the packet. It was agreed that it would be most unwise to allow any person, with whom they would be brought in contact in the sale of the jewels to suspect for a moment the amount of their booty. Their risks were by no means at an end, and if, during the process of disposing of the jewels, the attention of the police were drawn to them, they would in all probability lose everything, and be called upon to spend a considerable number of

years in serving Her Majesty gratuitously in the bargain.

When, by that most fortunate coincidence, Jack Moresby had come across the three men on coming out from the offices of his agents, they were then on their way to make the first attempt with the old Jew of Sandy's acquaintance, and we have seen already how Sam Bret had caught sight of his employer, and how assiduously the latter had tracked them on their way to Whitechapel.

Sam's joy at this extremely opportune meeting could with the greatest difficulty be dissimulated from his two companions. For some instants he was almost too excited to speak, and his discomposure was so evident, that Sneat noticed it, and asked him what was the matter. Sam's answer, though incoherent to a degree, did not, however, excite any suspicions as to the true cause of his perturbation. Sandy's mind, however, was evidently not at ease, for after searchingly staring at Sam's face as if to guess the true purport of his thoughts, he turned round sharply and glanced suspiciously at all the persons in

the immediate neighbourhood. He was uneasy, and for some moments tramped along by Bret's side in surly silence. A little while later, when he regained possession of his calmness, Sam Bret ventured to make the sign which Moresby had quickly noticed, and which had caused him so much satisfaction.

We know how the three men, followed by Jack Moresby, pursued their way through so many tortuous slums, until they reached the narrow street where the young planter, owing to the rush of the crowd, had lost sight of them. During the walk Sneat had several times expressed a fear lest the old Jew to whom they were going, should have passed over to the majority during the four years which had elapsed since his last visit to him. Sam Bret devoutly, but silently, hoped that this might prove the case, as the sale of the jewels would thereby be retarded; and now that a meeting with his employer was so near at hand, he was doubly anxious that the treasure should remain for a while longer in Sneat's possession and under his own supervision.

Although a little puzzled by the few structural changes which had occurred in the buildings of that neighbourhood during the last few years, Sandy Sneat, with very little trouble, recognised the court-yard in which the old Jew lived, and after one or two inquiries addressed to some unhappy-looking women who were lounging about, Sandy led the way towards a high narrow door, which looked as if it were being squeezed between two dilapidated houses. This door led into a small dark passage which had that peculiarly damp and musty smell common to third-rate pawn-shops.

As soon as they had entered the passage, the three men were met by a sallow-faced, curly-headed little boy, who looked suspiciously at them, and in shrill tones, asked what they wanted.

"Mr. Reuben still alive?" asked Sneat.

"What do you want him for?"

"Tell him Joe Marsh wants to see him about some good biz."

The boy after glancing in an undecided manner, with a pair of sharp black eyes, at Sandy's two companions who were standing behind him, curtly bade them wait a

minute, and disappeared into a half-open door at the end of the corridor.

"Joe Marsh! who is he?" asked Josiah, in a surprised tone.

"Great friend of mine, and a chap who knows you darned well, you chattering ass," returned Sneat politely, thinking it not worth his while to inform Josiah that Joe Marsh had been one of his many aliases in the old days when he needed them even more than he did at present.

"My gran'pa says you are to come in," said the small boy reappearing at the door.

The three men, led by Sneat, advanced along the passage, and presently found themselves in an apartment so gloomy, and so blocked up with a marvellous variety of articles, that it was impossible to tell the size of the room. There appeared to be no more light than is usually found in the average coal cellar, and it was only when their eyes became accustomed to the gloom that they could make out the immense amount of old clothing of all descriptions which hung from the ceiling like dingy stalactites. Almost every available inch of floor room was taken up by heaps of the

most curiously assorted goods. Telescopes, tall hats, gridirons, and female finery, were mixed up together in hopeless confusion; while here and there objects of considerable value, such as watches, spoons, and curious bits of bric-à-brac could be distinguished, mixed up in reckless fashion.

The obscurity was such that it was some time before Sam Bret could take in all these details, and he had to strain his eyes considerably before he discovered that the room was inhabited. In the darkest of the four corners, almost hidden behind an evil-smelling curtain composed of second-hand trousers which dangled from the ceiling, sat Mr. Reuben.

Were it not for the piercing eyes which seemed almost to illuminate the surrounding gloom, the old man might have easily been taken for one of the mixed heaps which were scattered about the room. He was seated on a curiously wrought arm-chair of very antique fashion, and his small wizened body was wrapped in a vast number of the most ill-assorted garments. He was swathed in all possible descriptions of shawls; round his shrunken legs was

wrapped a beautiful specimen of the most perfect Indian work, while his body from his waist to his thick white beard, was encircled by ropes of the cheapest, tawdriest, and also dirtiest shawls imaginable. Round his head he wore, twisted in turban-wise, what was evidently a crocheted antimacassar, the fringe of which hung in ludicrous fashion ever his low wrinkled forehead.

"Well! what do you want with me, Mr. Joe Marsh?" querulously asked the old man in a thin dry voice. "I think I remember you some four or five years agone, when, if my memory don't fail me, the little business you came upon didn't turn out to be so profitable as you thought for, eh?" and the old man drummed his fingers on a little black table which was placed in front of him.

"Yes, that's me, Mr. Reuben," said Sneat, "and I have been away for the benefit of my health since then."

"Whose your friends?" sharply asked the old dealer, ignoring the latter part of Sandy's answer.

"Oh, these is two friends of mine, who be partners along with me in a little

speculation we have joined in lately," returned Sneat, jerking his thumb in the direction of his two companions. "In fact, it's a big business I can tell you," he continued, "and it ought to mean a good many shekels for us all round."

"Well, what's it all about?" asked the old man with a sudden gleam in his black eyes; "you know, I have heard that from you before, and you never brought me anything out of the usual ruck."

"Well, this is rather different, as I think you will find," sniggered Sandy, as he produced from his trousers-pocket a little ball of soft brown paper. Advancing towards the Jew, he untwisted the paper, and during the operation, the jewel, which had been brought as a first venture, fell on the little black table.

It was a diamond of quite a respectable size, and evidently of very pure quality, for although roughly and uncouthly cut, its facets emitted, even in the gloom of that dingy chamber, some very beautiful flashes.

The old Jew, evidently surprised, bent eagerly down towards it, and taking it up in his knotted wrinkled fingers, held the

stone up for a closer inspection. He was evidently strongly interested, for turning round to a little shelf behind him, he produced a pair of large round spectacles, by the aid of which he proceeded to examine the diamond closely.

"The stone is a very fine one, I believe," Josiah ventured to observe. He was beginning to think the silence oppressive, and thought he would relieve it by a gentle apposite remark. Sneat gave vent to a loud guffaw, while the old man took not the faintest notice of the unfortunate black.

After turning over the stone in his fingers for several moments, and looking at it from different points, Mr. Reuben stared hard and searchingly at Sneat's face.

"Well, what is it?" asked Sneat, wincing under the old man's unswerving gaze.

"Any more like these?"

"Well, maybe there is, maybe there isn't," answered Sneat, doggedly. "Look here, old man, you needn't bother your 'ead about where it came from, or about how many there is of the same cut knocking about. All I need say is that there ain't no chance of their owners coming rummag-

ing round and worrying about 'em, because they have all been dead and gone these 'undred years, so you needn't bother yourself about that part of the show."

The old dealer then cast a rapid but searching glance at Sam Bret and Josiah, and, in fact, looked at them from top to toe. He was apparently satisfied with their appearance, and did not think it necessary to go further into the matter; for, laying down the diamond on the little table, he resettled himself in his old arm-chair and wrapped his hands up in one of the ragged shawls. After pursing up his lips for a moment or two, as if in meditation, he ejaculated, in a thin jerky voice, and looking straight at one of the piles of the old rubbish,—"Fifteen pounds!"

"Go on," answered Sneat, making a show of picking up the diamond and ostentatiously smoothing out the little piece of brown paper in which he had brought it. "Go on! why you know it's worth five times that!"

"Fifteen pounds, and you know me," repeated Mr. Reuben in the same dry jerky voice.

Sandy Sneat apparently did know him, and also seemed to be aware that it was useless to haggle with the old Jew, for, after turning towards Sam Bret, and silently shrugging his shoulders, he replaced the diamond on the table, and thrusting his hands into his pockets, waited silently.

Mr. Reuben was evidently not addicted to loquacity, and bending down, he reached, with considerable effort, under his chair, and finally produced a small but heavy black japanned box. Without troubling himself to address another word to the three men, he leisurely opened the box and produced therefrom fifteen sovereigns, which he placed on the table in front of him. He then enwrapped his purchase in a little piece of paper and placed it in the tin box, which was immediately relocked and returned in silence to its usual place under the old arm-chair.

Sandy Sneat's fingers closed with pliancy over the fifteen sovereigns, which were speedily deposited in the depths of his trousers-pocket.

"Got any more?" asked the old man laconically.

"Lots!" answered Sneat, with similar brevity.

"All right, bring them and we'll do business."

"How much money have you got here now?" asked Sandy, who, now that he had begun, was eager to get hold of as much money as possible.

Sam Bret, however, guessing his intention, and remembering that Sneat had the whole treasure in his possession at that moment, was much alarmed lest the man should insist upon parting with the whole lot there and then. This, of course, would never do, and Sam, for the first time since his entrance into the room, raised his voice.

"No, I won't have it, Sneat, you hear! There is no hurry, and this is enough for one day."

"Why not?" returned Sneat, angrily. "Old Reuben here has got enough money to plank down for five times as much swag as we've got."

"Well, I tell you I won't, and that's an end of it," replied Sam, taking Sneat by the arm and trying to lead him from the room. "Look here, Josiah," added Sam,

turning to the black man, "don't you allow it either, unless you want to lose every red cent of your share. He is trying to do us, and I'll tell you how presently."

"You are a liar!" retorted Sneat, angrily, trying to free himself from Sam's grasp.

"I don't care, and I mean what I say, and there's an end of it. There is no hurry, and I'm not against coming back to this old man here to-morrow, if we can't do better elsewhere."

Sandy evidently understood that Sam Bret was not in a mood to be trifled with, so he reluctantly gave up his intention of showing the dealer the whole packet of jewels. Before leaving the room, however, he called out to the old man to be sure and have plenty of money ready by next morning, for he promised to come back and sell his swag to him. "Never mind what those blokes say or do."

Sneat was enraged at Sam's interference, and his language on leaving the old Jew's house was so offensive that the young mulatto threatened to knock him down. Sam was not a bit afraid of trying conclusions with Sneat in this manner, for he felt

sure that he could knock him out of time in half a round. The white man, apparently thinking that discretion was the better part of valour, allowed himself to be pacified by Josiah, who, for his part, was quite bewildered by the whole affair. Finding Sandy was getting more tractable, Bret tried to persuade him that it was for his own good that he had prevented him selling all the jewels at once, declaring that Sneat was so excited at the prospect of getting money, that he would have been unmercifully cheated by the old man, and that it would be much more advantageous to return to the dealer the next morning cool-headed, and prepared to make a good bargain.

By the time they reached the entrance of the courtyard, the three men were once more on good terms, and began to congratulate themselves boisterously on the apparent certainty of their success.

In the meantime, during their interview with the old Jew, Sam had wondered what Moresby was doing. He had lost sight of him shortly before he and his two companions had turned out of the street into the courtyard, and he was exceedingly

anxious lest Jack should have missed them altogether, and have overrun their track. It was, accordingly, with the greatest satisfaction that, on coming out of the alley way, he caught sight of his master standing in the shadow of a door a few yards away, and apparently still on their track. Sam then again raising his hand to the back of his collar, made a sign which he knew that Jack understood to mean that he was to follow, and linking his arms into those of the two other men, he led them merrily down the street.

We know how the trio made several stoppages at public-houses on their way home, in order to drink numerous glasses to the success of their undertaking. All three men, nevertheless, knowing how carefully each had to watch the other, prudently abstained from excess, and Sam, at whose instigation the visits to the gin palaces had been principally made, was considerably disappointed to find how prudent his companions were. A little opportune insobriety would have eased matters considerably, and although keeping up a desultory conversation with the two men, Bret pondered all the way

home over all sorts of plans and projects for effecting a meeting with Jack Moresby. He knew that he was not far behind them, and when they arrived at the lodging-house, he arranged it so that Sneat and Josiah passed into the house first, giving him the opportunity of making a brief signal to his employer.

CHAPTER VII.

As soon as Sam Bret had climbed up to the dismal room which constituted their temporary abode, he cast about in his mind for a plan by means of which he might communicate with Jack Moresby without attracting the attention of his two companions. Glancing round the room, his eyes fell on a little piece of chalk lying among some other rubbish on the mantelshelf. It had probably been left there by some former lodger, and the sight of it immediately suggested to his mind a feasible plan.

Sandy Sneat's attention was entirely engrossed in the job of ripping up the lining of his waistcoat so as to get at the packet of jewels, and Josiah so keenly watched the interesting operation that Sam remained for the moment almost unobserved. Instantly profiting by the opportunity, he

scribbled a few words in his pocket-book, tore out the leaf, wrapped it round the piece of chalk, gently opened the window and threw the message out into the street.

The whole operation had to be performed so quickly that Sam Bret had been utterly unable, on the spur of the moment, to concoct a plan for communication with Jack. Under the strict watch which followed his every movement, a secret meeting could not possibly be arranged unless well and carefully planned. Events were succeeding each other with such bewildering rapidity that Bret was quite incapable of foreseeing or calculating anything even ten minutes ahead, and he had, accordingly, been obliged to limit his message to a request that Jack would quickly write his address on the wall opposite with the piece of white chalk, and that he should then go away at once and wait until he could communicate further with him.

Owing to the avidity with which his two partners were gloating at the other end of the room over the jewels which had been unpacked, Sam was able to advance once or twice unnoticed towards the window, so as

to ascertain whether Jack was carrying out his request. He was beginning to fear that his message had miscarried, when at last he was overjoyed to distinguish, written on the opposite pavement in large white letters —"Merton's Hotel, Strand."

At last he knew Jack's address, and Sam trusted that during the day some opportunity might be afforded him of sending a letter to the hotel. He was, however, still undecided how to act, and determined to be guided by his partners' next move.

His attention was distracted from his perplexing thoughts by an altercation which had arisen between Sneat and the black man. They had apparently sufficiently feasted their eyes on the jewels, and having helped Sneat to pack them up again in the piece of brown paper, Josiah had seemingly made some remark touching the fifteen pounds which Sneat had received from the Jew.

"But, Mr. Sneat, you said we should divide equally all we got," nervously remarked Josiah.

"Well, of course," grimly assented the white man, thrusting his hands deep into

his trousers-pockets, as if nothing would ever induce him to withdraw them again.

"Well, threes into fifteen is five, so my share is five pounds," continued Josiah nervously.

"Very good, Mr. Josiah, very good," answered Sneat, sitting down on his bed. "Your arithmetic is darned good, and by the way you works out the division, it's almost a pity you didn't stay in Grenadilla and be a schoolmaster."

Sam said nothing, but listened to what would come next.

"But—but, I want my money, Sandy Sneat," retorted Josiah, who was plucking up courage, "and I'm going to get it too." His little eyes glistened wickedly, his fists were tightly clenched, and the black man had evidently worked himself up to a high pitch of excitement. His fat round body trembled with rage as he poured out a torrent of abuse. "Oh that's it, you thief! By the holy law of Moses, I'll have my money, I tell you! You got me in Grenadilla to join you in this rascally business, and now you want to cheat me out of my fair share. Lord 'ave

mussy me, but you'll swing for this, you scamp! You think I'm going to lose all the money I've advanced, eh? you liver-coloured sneak, but I won't! Then I tell you——"

But Josiah told him no more, for Sneat jumping up from his bed with a bound, landed the unfortunate Josiah such a ringing blow on the side of his neck, that the poor man was pitched right into the fireplace. Sneat was on him in an instant, and was proceeding to kick him unmercifully, when his attention was suddenly distracted by the violent application of Sam Bret's fist to his nose, making him feel as if that organ had been suddenly pulverised out of all manner of shape. The blow sent him sprawling across the floor, and so utterly cowed was he, that, without attempting to retaliate, he silently picked himself up and crawled back to his bed.

"You'd better mind what you're about, Sandy Sneat," said Sam, who was intensely disgusted at the bully's cowardly attack on Josiah. "Josiah was quite right, and you'll begin by sharing out five pounds to each of us. Now, and at once, too!"

Josiah picked himself up out of the fire-place, rubbing several sore places and then advanced with Sam towards Sandy. The latter seeing that the men were in no humour to be trifled with, thought it prudent to comply with their request, and muttering sullenly, he almost flung five sovereigns to each of them.

"It's no good, Sneat," said Sam pocketing the money, "you may as well be civil over it; it's part of our bargain, and what's more, if you don't act square, I'll break every bone in your body, you skunk!"

Sneat was thoroughly cowed, for he did not venture to make even the slightest response to Sam Bret's rather violent language. Like all bullies his dread of corporal punishment was such that for the moment he would have been satisfied with only his due and fair share of the jewels, provided that he might be free of the young mulatto who was beginning to inspire him with a wholesome dread. He was commencing to fear that he might not ultimately get the best of the bargain, and he was firmly resolved to dissolve the partnership as soon as possible.

After a few moments, he had sufficiently recovered himself to sulkily inquire of Sam Bret what he intended to do.

"Well," said Sam, "Josiah and I are not in the violent hurry about selling the stones that you seem to be in, and I think we'll wait a little. Besides, I don't trust that old Jew of yours."

"Wait, eh? what for!" interrupted Sneat angrily, "You've got an object in all this, Sam Bret, and I'm hanged if you're going to let me in! Look here, Josiah!" said he turning to the black man, "don't you trust him; he's got some plan in his head and he's going to peach on us, I'll lay my life. No! we'll either divide the swag between us now, or we'll go back at once to Reuben and sell him the whole lot, and then share the money."

"I think we had better divide the jewels now, and say good-bye to each other at once;" acquiesced Josiah, "I'm tired and sick of all this, and what with your bad treatment, bad language, and all the danger of being caught by the police, I'm nearly out of my mind, and want to see the end of it."

This, however, would never do, and Sam was getting much perplexed at the turn that matters were taking. An immediate division of the jewels was to be prevented at all costs. A meeting with Moresby was so near at hand, that the idea of being satisfied with only a third of the treasure was out of the question, and he felt sure that such a result would bitterly disappoint the young planter. Yet, if he opposed the division of the jewels, which he saw that Josiah was anxious to bring about, Sandy Sneat would insist upon taking them there and then to Whitechapel, and they would be handed over in a lot to the old Jew.

Bret saw that Sneat's suspicions were aroused and that he would insist on following one of the two courses. The amicable division of the spoil being out of the question, it accordingly remained for him to devise some plan by which the other alternative might be turned to his profit. Matters having been precipitated by the scuffle in the bedroom, it was hopeless to think of communicating with Jack Moresby before taking some decisive step.

He was allowed but little time for con-

sideration, for Sneat and Josiah were both awaiting his answer. Bret in a few seconds made up his mind to follow the only plan which presented itself to him at that moment. It was a plucky resolve, but this was no case for half measures. Help from Jack Moresby being unattainable, owing to the difficulty of communicating with him, Sam Bret determined to take the whole thing on his own shoulders. Sneat's cowardice had given him courage; Josiah he looked upon as not worthy of being taken into account, and Sam Bret during a few moments' reflection, made up his mind on a decidedly bold course of action.

He remembered that the court-yard in which the old Jew lived, had appeared to him that morning to be very quiet and almost deserted, and knowing that Sandy Sneat was no physical match for him, he determined to attempt to obtain the sole possession of the jewels by force. He had no time just then to mature the details of his plan, and he left a lot to that good luck which had hitherto followed him so faithfully. He had, in fact, once or twice thought of putting his plans into execution

in the very room which he occupied, but there were several objections to this. In the first place, he would have to make his escape as quickly as possible, immediately after he had succeeded in wresting the jewels from Sneat's grasp, and the room being on the third floor, there were so many stairs to descend, that the other two men would have time to recover from their surprise, and would be able to raise a hue and cry after him. Sandy was, moreover, known to several of the inhabitants of the house, and would therefore, very probably, obtain their assistance.

Having determined on his course of action, Sam then pretended to argue out the case with his two partners, and, after opposing a certain amount of resistance to the project, he finally appeared to yield to their proposal that the jewels should be taken at once to old Reuben, and sold to him in a lump. Bret, however, managed in such a way that the jewels were not again sewn up in the inside of Sneat's waistcoat. That precaution had been necessary, in order that they might be passed safely through the Custom-house at Southampton, but now there was no need of such care, and the

diamonds were made up in a compact parcel securely tied with string.

As may be imagined, however, Sneat insisted on carrying this parcel himself, and in a few minutes later, the three men left the house on their way back to Whitechapel.

By this time the day was considerably advanced, and although it was nearly two o'clock, the three men had had nothing to eat, save some rolls and coffee which they had purchased at a confectioner's shop on their way for the first time to the old dealer's house.

Feeling remarkably hungry, they turned into a restaurant where they made a hearty meal. During this operation, it may be guessed that Sneat, notwithstanding his voracious appetite, did not allow his attention to wander for an instant from the brown paper parcel which he had carefully deposited beside his plate. The meal concluded, the three men feeling considerably heavier and less active, no objection was made when Sandy proposed that, instead of walking, they should do the rest of their journey by the underground railway, as he happened to know that one of the stations

was not far away from the locality to which they were going.

The proposal was suggested by the fact that they were at that moment, passing the entrance of the Monument station; three third-class tickets were speedily obtained, and they soon found themselves on the platform awaiting the next train.

Although hardly more than twenty-four hours had elapsed since Josiah had first set foot on English soil, the rapid succession of events which had occurred since he left the ship, made him feel as if a considerable number of days had passed since his landing at Southampton. Born and bred at Grenadilla, he had never left that Island, save to make some short unimportant journey to Trinidad or other neighbouring colony. His experience had accordingly been of the most limited, and the crowd of marvellous sights and impressions, which met him at every turn as soon as he had set foot in England, completely dazzled and confused him. His astonishment at all the wonders of our civilisation was such that he could do little more than gaze at them in speechless surprise. The streets, the many-

storied houses, the electric lights, and especially the shops, filled him with child-like wonder. Many things which he saw in London appeared to him so wonderful that he did not attempt to seek an explanation of them, and it all seemed to him like a fairy tale.

When Sneat suggested that they should travel by the underground railway, Josiah assented to the proposal in just the same manner as he would have acquiesced in a suggestion that they should go by balloon. Nevertheless, that descent into the bowels of the earth as it seemed to him, so that they might be transported to some other locality, appeared to him marvellous in the extreme, and he could hardly believe that the vast railway station, with its platforms, tracks, signal boxes, weighing machines, and bookstalls, was all underground, and that over their heads were the muddy streets and grimy houses of London, with their ever-changing crowd of busy workers.

The enormous pictorial advertisements which covered every spare inch of wall and hoarding especially attracted his attention. They seemed to him like a gigantic scrap

book spread out for his inspection, and the bright-coloured pictures, representing every conceivable kind of ware, filled him with admiration.

Presently, up came the train which they were waiting for, but finding that they were at the wrong end of the platform for the third-class carriages, they had to run the whole length of the train in order to get to their proper compartment. So little time do the trains stay at the stations, that hardly had Sam Bret and Sneat jumped into the carriage, than the guard slammed the door and blew his whistle. The train began to move slowly on.

"Great Cæsar, where's Josiah!" exclaimed Sam, finding that he was not with them.

Sneat uttered a tremendous oath, and springing past two old women who were the other occupants of the carriage, he reached the window just in time to observe Josiah placidly gazing, in wrapped contemplation, on a gorgeous mural advertisement of somebody's soap, when the train, accelerating its speed, passed quickly out of sight into the tunnel.

Sneat sank overwhelmed into one of the

seats, and Sam Bret all at once understood the cause of his depression. The loss of the companionship of the black man would have been a very small matter, but the state of the feelings of the two men may be imagined when it was known that the diamonds were in Josiah's possession.

While waiting for the train, Sandy Sneat had noticed that one of his shoe laces was untied. In order to set right this irregularity in his attire, and requiring the use of both his hands, he had handed the jewels to Josiah to hold for a minute. The train arriving before he had concluded the operation, and being very anxious not to miss it, Sneat and Sam had hastened to the third-class carriages, never doubting for an instant but that Josiah was following close on their heels. The attractions of the coloured pictures, however, had been so strong that the black man had not noticed the arrival of the train, and it was only some instants after his companions had disappeared, that he awakened to the fact that they were no longer with him. His discomfiture on missing them was almost as great as theirs had been on finding that he was not in the

carriage, for he felt like a child who had suddenly lost its nurse in some crowded thoroughfare.

The fact that he was in sole possession of the treasure did not call to his mind a single one of those thoughts which were torturing his two partners. It never occurred to him that he was now sole master of the booty, and that it only depended upon him whether he ever saw the two men again. On the contrary, Josiah's mind was only exercised by the thought of how he could get home. Fortunately he knew the name of the street in which their lodging was situated, but although probably not a mile distant he looked with dread upon the idea of finding his way back there alone. During the last three weeks he had been so cowed by his two companions that all feeling of independence appeared to have died out in him. After looking helplessly around him for some instants, he sat down on one of the benches on the platform and gazed vacantly in front of him. He was quite ignorant of the locality in which the dealer's house was situated, but even if he had known it, the idea of taking the next train to that place

would never have occurred to him, so dazed was he by his predicament and so upset by his solitude.

After some moments of bewildered reflection, Josiah decided that the only course left to him was to return to the lodging-house and to wait there until Sam Bret and Sneat should come back. Plucking up courage, he left the platform and found himself once more in the street. Looking about him for some person of mild demeanour, he finally summoned up all his courage and inquired of an old lady who was passing, which was the nearest way to the street in which his lodging was situated. The old lady, unmistakably startled by being accosted by a black man, gave him, with a good deal of trepidation, some directions which hopelessly puzzled the unfortunate Josiah. Beyond the fact that he was to turn to the left about half-a-dozen times, then to the right a corresponding number, the old lady's directions had sounded like gibberish to him. Wisely determining to take only the first turning indicated, and then to ask again, the black man started on his homeward journey. The novelty of

being alone in the streets of London soon wore off, and after passing along two or three thoroughfares, Josiah gained courage with every step and began to experience a considerable amount of satisfaction in his new-found liberty.

He reflected that he need be in no violent hurry, as the two other men could not possibly return for some time, and Josiah sauntered easily along, admiring all the wonderful things exposed to view in the shop windows.

Presently he came to one which apparently possessed considerable attraction for him. It was what generally terms itself a "Fancy Emporium," and the window was chock-full of a wonderful assortment of gaudy-looking goods, marked in large figures at most attractively low prices. Several of the articles exhibited especially took Josiah's fancy, and recollecting that the five sovereigns which Sandy Sneat had so ungraciously surrendered, were that moment lying in his pocket, he thought that he might very well lay out a portion of this money in some of the articles which were so temptingly displayed.

Overcoming a certain amount of nervousness, he entered the shop and gingerly advanced towards the counter. It was covered with all sorts of cheap ornaments and similar rubbish. The Emporium was apparently only looked after by one young person, and she was busily engaged at that moment in attending to the somewhat fastidious requirements of a three-quarter-aged lady, who was busily engaged in a close inspection of some bright green spectacle cases.

This lady was a hard-featured person, having a striking resemblance to the austere countenances which frequently adorn door knockers. A plain black bonnet, from the sides of which two pairs of iron grey cork-screw curls seemed to depend, represented the very embodiment of rigid respectability, while the stiff slate-coloured gown which clothed the lady's somewhat muscular form, looked as hard and unyielding as if it had been cast in a mould. She was apparently very shortsighted, for every article which attracted her notice was brought up for inspection to within a very few inches of the strong steel spectacles that rested on

her aquiline nose. Her purchases had been numerous, for the counter was littered with a number of parcels of various sizes.

Josiah, being politely requested by the young woman to wait a few moments, occupied the time in trying to make up his mind as to what article he should lay out his money on. This was no easy task, for there were at least a hundred different objects which equally took his fancy, but although strongly attracted by them, Josiah did not belong to that category of fools who are said to be so soon parted from their money.

Finally the iron-grey lady appeared to have concluded her bargains, and, after having given certain directions, she picked up some of her purchases and left the shop. Josiah having at last made up his mind, pointed out to the young woman the divers half-dozen things that he had decided to buy. These were speedily made up by the natty fingers of the attendant into a number of small parcels, and laden with these, Josiah left the shop to continue his way homewards.

Josiah was not often guilty of such

extravagance, and he had never been known when at Grenadilla to purchase a single article which was not an absolute necessity.

In this instance, however, he considered himself fully justified in departing, for once, from his usual thrifty habits, and he the more easily reconciled his conscience to the extravagance by the reflection that he could sell the articles in Grenadilla for five times the price which he had paid for them.

It was already growing dusk, and the early winter's night was beginning to close in. A thick yellow fog descended slowly from the house-tops and settled in the streets, making the flaring lights look steamy and indistinct. A cold drizzling rain was falling, and Josiah closely buttoned round him the cheap brown overcoat which he had been wise enough to buy the day before at Southampton. He was beginning to feel very uncomfortable, and regretted that he had dawdled so much on his way, for, what with the fog, the darkness, and the never-ceasing rush of carts and cabs, he was beginning to lose courage

and to doubt whether he should ever get home.

He wondered whether the other two men would have got back to the lodging before he arrived there, and the thought of meeting them was by no means pleasant. He felt sure that they would blame him for having missed the train, and he was not at all certain that, under the circumstances, Sam Bret would again protect him from the probable effects of Sneat's anger. He knew that they must have been in a great state of anxiety regarding the safety of the jewels, and, as he reflected over the immense responsibility which they entailed, he cast his eyes over the armful of parcels which he was carrying.

A cold sweat broke out over him, and he stopped as suddenly as if he had been shot. He rushed excitedly to the nearest street-lamp and frantically examined the parcels.

Horror! The one containing the jewels was not there!

He remembered now that it had been done up in brown paper like the others; but the string with which it had been tied

was white, whereas all those in his arms were fastened with red twine.

The unfortunate man's alarm was so great that his brain whirled, and he had to steady himself by the lamp-post to save falling to the ground.

A passer-by, seeing that something ailed him, stopped and asked whether he was ill.

"No—n-no, thank you! But oh—oh!" —and the poor man nearly burst into tears. Thoroughly overwhelmed, and fearing that he might unguardedly be led into saying something which he ought not to divulge, Josiah turned hurriedly away from his interlocutor and hastened aimlessly down the street. His excitement was so great that for some time he was unable to think, and all that he could do was to moan to himself in a low tone and mumble in "patois" all sorts of meaningless supplications and curses.

Presently he recovered himself sufficiently to be able to remember that he had had the parcel of diamonds in his hands when entering the "Emporium," and it consequently occurred to him that he must have left it by mistake in the shop.

The whole misfortune had occurred through his being tempted to buy the things which had attracted him in a shop-window, and when this idea appealed to his mind, Josiah was so enraged that he violently threw all his purchases into the gutter, much to the astonishment of the passers-by, the majority of whom thought him drunk, while the more charitable ascribed the unusual act to madness.

Regardless of the calls of several people who drew his attention to his property, Josiah ran back as fast as his fat legs could carry him towards the fancy shop. He was in an agony of dread lest he should not be able to recognise the place again, and his appearance and conduct were so strange that policeman No. X. 340 quickly followed him, considering that his services might very possibly be required.

Fortunately for Josiah the bazaar did not happen to be a very long way off; but so nervous was he that he almost ran past the place before he noticed that it was the shop he was looking for. The unhappy negro was so puffed and blown by his unwonted exertions that it was only with considerable

difficulty that he managed to make himself understood by the young woman who had attended to him.

"No, sir, I did not notice any parcel lying on the counter after you left."

Josiah's eyes nearly started out of his head, and he grasped the counter spasmodically with his fingers so as to prevent himself from sinking to the ground under the blow.

"Eh—what? Not here?" he finally managed to pronounce.

Tottering to a chair, he fell heavily into it and mopped up with a big red handkerchief the large drops of cold perspiration which stood out like beads on his shining black forehead. Some instants passed before he recovered himself, even in a moderate degree, and at last he looked up into the young woman's face with such an expression of hopeless misery that she began to wonder what could be the cause of the black man's evident grief.

"Oh, God! They will kill me!" he muttered to himself two or three times, and, as if incapable of further thought, he

cast his eyes about the shop in an idiotically helpless manner.

"I suppose you are in trouble about your parcel, sir?" at last remarked the young woman, who was beginning to wonder what she ought to do with the man. "Now I think of it, I was serving a lady while you were here."

"Yes, what?" ejaculated Josiah.

"Well, I was thinking that very possibly the lady took away your parcel among hers."

Josiah started up at this suggestion and clutched at the new hope it gave him.

"Yes, but where is she—where can I find her?"

Fortunately for him, it happened that the lady had made a considerable number of purchases, and that she had only carried the smaller articles away with her, leaving the more bulky things to be sent later to her house.

With feverish haste Josiah tried to write down the address which the young woman gave him; but his hand trembled so much that the girl, good-naturedly taking the pencil from him, wrote on a card: "Mrs.

Perker, Laburnum Lodge, North Road, Highbury."

Muttering a few words of thanks, Josiah took the card and tottered out of the shop. His mind was so completely discomposed that only a chaos of delirious thoughts rushed through his brain, leaving him quite powerless to decide on any reasonable line of action. He was filled with terror at the idea of returning to the lodging-house, and the prospect of meeting his two partners without the jewels made him tremble with fear. At first he thought of going immediately to Highbury to claim the jewels from Mrs. Perker; but his complete ignorance of London and its ways rendered this project impracticable. There was nothing for it now but to return to the lodging and throw himself on the mercy of the two men he dreaded so much to meet.

Several times during his journey back towards the Tower he thought of running away, so that he might never see Sandy Sneat again; but his ignorance of English life, and his fear of being entirely alone in a strange land, made him prefer the terrors

which he could guess, to the unknown dangers of solitude in London. It was nearly five o'clock when, in fear and trembling, he crawled up the stairs of the lodging-house.

CHAPTER VIII.

When he arrived opposite the door of their room, he waited for a moment so as to muster up all the little courage he possessed to face the storm which he knew his presence would evoke. He could hear now and then a few words snapped out by either Sneat or Sam Bret, and knowing that nothing could be gained by putting off the evil moment, Josiah at last made up his mind to enter and submit to his fate.

His appearance at the threshold caused the two men, who had been sitting in sullen discomfiture on their beds, to start up with exclamations of angry surprise.

"Where on earth have you been to?" exclaimed Sneat at once. Then, noticing that Josiah's hands were unencumbered by anything like a parcel, the two men rushed at him, and fiercely clutching him by the

throat and coat, hoarsely asked what he had done with the diamonds.

Josiah's terror was so great that he remained speechless, and the two men, seeing his condition, dragged him roughly across the room and almost threw him on to one of the beds. Standing in front of him, Sam with folded arms, and Sneat with clenched fists, they again repeated their questions.

"Oh, mercy—my God! don't kill me!" whined Josiah, putting up his hands as if to shield his head from impending blows, "it wasn't my fault, I swear, Mr. Sneat. Oh, Mr. Bret! for heaven's sake don't let him kill me! I couldn't help it, and I never knew they was gone," and the unfortunate man, overcome by his intense fear, sobbed aloud like a child.

"Gone!" exclaimed Sam in horrified accents.

"Gone!" repeated Sneat with a string of horrible oaths. "Gone—you nigger! Where? Who's got 'em?" he shouted, shaking the unfortunate man fiercely, and looking as if he would kill him. Sam, though terribly upset by the news, fearing

that Sneat would proceed to extremities, held his arm and pulled him off the prostrate negro.

"Let him alone for a minute, and let's hear what the blamed fool has got to say. Come on, Josiah—shut up that blubbering, and tell us now at once what has happened. Pull yourself together, man—and out with it! You leave him alone, Sandy Sneat, and let's hear what he's got to say for himself."

Josiah, gaining courage under Sam's protection, recovered a certain amount of his presence of mind. Spasmodically, and with a good many irrelevant details, he finally related all the adventures which had befallen him since they had left him on the platform of the underground railway station, his narrative being frequently interrupted by sundry abusive remarks on the part of Sandy Sneat, in which Sam Bret did not scruple to join.

When Josiah came to the end of his story, his two partners completely broke down, Sneat every now and then disturbing the silence by hurling imprecations, threats, and curses at Josiah's offending head. The question of what was to be done was several

times put by one to the other, without obtaining any answer which was worth a moment's consideration.

Sneat paced up and down the room in silent meditation. Presently stopping short, he exclaimed—

"There's only one way out of it. We must have them jewels to-night somehow or the other—even if we 'ave to cut the old woman's throat for 'em. To-morrow morning she'll give them to the police, and the whole thing will be knocked on the 'ead!"

"No—no! I'll not have murder done!" exclaimed Bret. "Let us go now, at once, and boldly claim the jewels from her. Very likely she'll believe us and hand them over quietly."

"Very likely she'll believe us!" sneered Sneat. "Why, you chuckle-headed simpleton, do you think that any woman in her senses would go and give away a heap of jewels like those to the first three blokes who might ask her for 'em?"

"She looked as if she was a good respectable lady," Josiah ventured to whine from his crouching position on the floor.

"Shut up!" thundered Sneat, savagely, "and if I catch you opening that black muzzle of yours again, I'll knock all your grinders down your throat." Then, pondering for a moment, he turned to Bret—

"Well, p'r'aps, after all, you're right—we'll try to get them back peaceably first, and if that don't work, well, then"—he muttered grimly—"I'll 'ave my way. Here! you there—give me that card again—'Mrs. Perker, Laburnum Lodge, North Road, Highbury.' I think I knows that neighbourhood. Let's see, it's now past six o'clock. If we start now we ought to fetch up at the old woman's 'ouse by eight or thereabouts. Come on—we'll go at once."

"Oh, dear me! where will all this end?" moaned Josiah.

"End? You fool!" exclaimed Sam Bret, furious at the disastrous mishap. "If it hadn't been for you, it would all have been ended the right way, long before this. And I'll tell you what it is—if the old woman won't surrender the diamonds after all, I'll give you up to Sandy Sneat for good, and he can murder you by inches, for all I care."

The unhappy negro groaned in agony, and so broken was he in spirit that he begged to be left behind in the lodging, while the other two went to Highbury. He was in so pitiable a condition that he cared but little now whether he ultimately shared the treasure or not; all he wanted was to be left in peace and not to be asked to join in any more of the risks and dangers of the unhappy affair.

But Sneat would not hear of it.

"Oh, no, you don't!" said he. "You're going to come along o' us. The old woman knows you by sight, most likely saw you in the shop. You've got to ask her for your jewels, not us. Besides, my friend, for better or for worse, you stick by us, let me tell you, and if we go to quod or swing for this job, we'll do it all together. I see your game, Master Josiah. You want to be left in peace and quiet, so that the moment our backs is turned you can run out to the police station and peach on the whole show, now it's gettin' 'ot. Get up, you black beast!" exclaimed the ruffian, kicking the unfortunate Josiah, as he sat helplessly on the floor.

Sam Bret was at his wits' ends to know what to do. Although his motives were very different from those which actuated Sandy Sneat, he was quite as anxious as he to save the jewels. The whole treasure had been almost within his grasp for so long that the thought of now losing it for ever was intolerable. He remembered, besides, that he had taken the whole responsibility of the matter on his own shoulders, and he now bitterly regretted his temerity in having done so. Jack Moresby, he knew, was at that moment anxiously waiting to get news of him, and Bret could not resign himself to the task of going to his young master, after all he had gone through, only to tell him that the jewels were irretrievably lost. The mulatto, moreover, reflected that Mrs. Perker had no right whatever to the treasure, and he consequently failed to see that the act of relieving her of their possession was anything like robbery, even though the means adopted might include burglary and violence. The idea of murder he could not for one moment countenance, and he firmly stipulated with Sandy Sneat that it was only on the condition that there was to

be nothing like bloodshed that he would consent to join him in this final attempt to regain possession of the jewels.

"What a chicken-'earted sort you are!" was Sneat's answer to Bret's stipulation. "Why, man! I've run the risk of swingin' 'alf-a-dozen times before this for jobs not worth a quarter as much as this; but you needn't worry your fiddle-strings about any of the knifing work which may have to be done, because from what that black ass there says, I don't expect there will be any need for it. The old woman will knuckle down in two shakes, you bet, when I ask 'er for the swag. I used to 'ave a little persuasive way with the old ladies," continued the ruffian, "which never allowed them to refuse me anything."

The jewels being no longer in their possession, the necessity for keeping a close watch on each other's movements had disappeared, and Sneat had now no fears about leaving Bret alone in the lodging with Josiah, while he went out to procure some of the implements and tools which would enable him to effect, if necessary, an unceremonious entrance into Mrs. Perker's

house. It being Saturday night, the shops were not yet closed, and he was able, without too much trouble, to purchase a few tools sometimes used by carpenters and more frequently by burglars.

The moment after Sneat left the room, Bret finding himself no longer under the vigilance of that individual, determined immediately to communicate with Jack Moresby. He was very doubtful as to what he ought to do, and although not knowing how far away the hotel indicated was situated, he guessed that there would not be time to obtain Jack's answer before Sneat returned. Sam Bret was accordingly forced to rely solely on his own unaided efforts, but he resolved to send a message directing Moresby to proceed as quickly as possible to Mrs. Perker's address at Highbury. Bret was determined, by some means or other, that night to obtain sole possession of the treasure. He would make use of Sneat's superior astuteness in receiving the diamonds from the hands of their present possessor, but was prepared to go to extreme measures to prevent the ruffian from retaining for any time the

precious packet. If luck favoured him, Jack Moresby might possibly arrive on the scene in time to assist him, but even should that not be possible, the mulatto, being physically more than a match for Sneat, was quite prepared to try conclusions with him alone. Josiah was now in such a piteous condition of mind that he was not worthy of being taken into account.

Hastily scribbling a few words on a piece of paper, Sam Bret left the room, telling the black man that he would return in a few minutes. In the street, he soon came across a cab, and the coachman, in consideration of a liberal advance, promised to drive with all speed to Merton's Hotel and deliver the note into Jack Moresby's own hand.

Sam then returned to the lodging and rejoined Josiah, who was beginning to be alarmed at the absence of the two men. He was still sitting on the edge of one of the beds with his head in his hands, bemoaning the dreadful predicament in which he found himself. This last move, now being contemplated, probably comprised burglary, robbery and all sorts of

violence, including even possible murder. It was the climax, and the unfortunate Josiah had quite made up his mind that hanging was the fate in store for him. He was quite sure that if the police happened to arrive on the scene, he would fall into their clutches, for his short fat legs, even if they were not paralyzed by fear, would never allow him to make good his escape.

The state of Jack Moresby's feelings during the whole of that day may be imagined. He knew that matters were approaching a crisis, and his impatience and anxiety chafed exceedingly at his enforced inactivity. When he had, that morning, seen the three men disappear into the lodging-house, he had waited for some signal which he felt sure that his overseer would give him, and when he at last caught sight of the piece of paper, wrapped round the bit of chalk, fall on to the pavement, he had excitedly picked it up and had read its meagre contents with the greatest avidity. The note was of the shortest, and in no way satisfied Jack's thirst for information. It had evidently been scribbled by Sam Bret in the greatest hurry, and said—

"All right, sir, so far. It's worth thousands. Write your address with the chalk on the pavement opposite, and please wait until I come or write to you. Don't show yourself, for heaven's sake, sir."

Jack read these few lines over and over again, but their purport was so simple that there were not two ways of interpreting them. Firstly, the "All right," filled him with the wildest hopes, but the expression was vague and might mean almost anything Secondly, the words "worth thousands" caused his heart to beat high, for he now knew that he had not wasted his time and money in a wild-goose chase. The rest of the note, however, was much less satisfactory. If it were "all right," why was he to keep himself out of sight, and why had not Sam Bret been more explicit? Jack Moresby, though his mind was full of conflicting hopes and fears, wisely determined to follow his overseer's directions, and he returned to his hotel, where he remained anxiously expecting, every moment, to receive news or a communication of some sort.

When the hours passed on and the

evening succeeded to the afternoon without bringing the longed-for news, Jack Moresby could hardly contain his impatience, and he tortured himself during his enforced inactivity, with all sorts of fears and apprehensions. He was unwilling to leave the hotel even for a moment lest Sam Bret or a message from him should come in his absence; but he was, nevertheless, two or three times on the point of rushing back to the house near the Tower in the hope of seeing Sam again and of putting an end to his anxiety.

Dinner or any other meal was out of the question, and Jack Moresby spent the long hours of weary waiting in pacing feverishly up and down the hotel smoking-room. At last, when his patience was almost at an end and he was meditating some desperate act, one of the waiters came up and informed him that a man was outside asking for him. Nearly overturning the waiter in his haste, Jack rushed out, hoping to see the honest face of Sam Bret once more. He was greatly disappointed to find that it was only another note. Hastily unfolding it, his eyes fell on these words:—

"In great trouble, sir. Now on our last chance. Meet me at half-past eight to-night outside Mrs. Perker's house, Laburnum Lodge, North Road, Highbury. Be sure to come alone and very quietly."

"Good heavens! what is this?" exclaimed Jack, as he read the note, and his heart fell as he noticed the despondent tone in which it was written. There wasn't the slightest clue to enable Moresby to guess the nature of the predicament. The overseer did not say where the treasure was, or into whose hands it had fallen; and, again, who was Mrs. Perker and what was she doing with it? The directions stating that he was to meet Sam Bret outside Mrs. Perker's house at half-past eight, and that he was to come quietly and alone, made him lose himself in conjectures of all sorts. He could make neither head nor tail of the matter. It was already nearly seven o'clock, and on inquiring from the coachman who brought the note, he found that it would take nearly an hour to drive to Highbury. Bret's note directed that he was to be outside Laburnum Lodge exactly at half-past eight, and Jack, anxious not to do

anything which might interfere with the success of any plan which his overseer was working, resolved to be at the place indicated punctually at the time specified. There was, accordingly, still a good half hour to spare, and feeing the cabman handsomely, Jack bade him wait until he was ready to start for Highbury.

The time spent in waiting and in reaching the rendezvous seemed to creep with tortoise-like sloth, and during the drive Jack turned over in his mind a hundred different reasons which might account for Sam's strange instructions.

When the cab at last reached Highbury, Jack ordered the man to put him down at the beginning of North Road, and having paid him for the journey, he satisfied himself, before proceeding further, that the cab had been driven away from the neighbourhood.

It was a very dark night, and the fog was so thick that it was only with the greatest difficulty that Jack managed to make out, by the light of a street lamp, the name, North Road, affixed to one of the houses at the corner. Looking at his watch,

he saw that he was about five minutes late, and he hastened along the street as quickly as he was able.

The neighbourhood appeared to be quite deserted, and although Moresby strained his ear to catch the slightest sound, he failed to distinguish anything like the noise of footsteps. An unhappy cat, probably shut out from its usual warm bed, was protesting in long-drawn accents against his hard luck, but no other sound could he distinguish in the thick muggy atmosphere.

CHAPTER IX.

Laburnum Lodge, the residence of Mrs. Perker, occupied a corner of one of the quietest roads in Highbury. It was an exceedingly prim, respectable-looking brick house, standing in a small trim garden of its own, and bearing a strong resemblance to a doll's house, looked at through a very powerful telescope. It might as well have been called Pyramid Lodge as Laburnum Lodge, the absence of the flowers referred to being as complete as that of the hoary monuments of Egypt.

It was past six o'clock, quite dark, and the rain was falling fast when Mrs. Perker was at last set down at her garden gate by a penny 'bus. Being a person of precise and methodical habits, she refused to avail herself of the shelter of her house until she had groped about for some moments in

a search for the foot-scraper, which, finally being discovered, received the firm attention of two golosh-clad feet of respectable dimensions. This ceremony performed, Mrs. Perker hastily marched up the little gravel path leading to the two white steps which formed the threshold of her front door. She rang with the same determination that marked most of her actions, and was by no means pleased at having to wait in the rain for nearly three minutes, until a small sharp-featured, red-nosed girl thought proper to open the door. This part of the business, however, did not take place until numerous bolts and bars had been shot back and taken down, and the girl had satisfied herself of the identity of the applicant for admission by placing her nose and one eye in the aperture left by the door, which was still on the chain.

"Oh! it's you, mem," placidly remarked the girl, as if she had not heard her mistress's tones, which had been considerably raised through the keyhole during the last two minutes.

"I was afraid that it might be burglars, mem," observed the handmaiden, letting her

mistress in, and proceeding to divest her of her cloak and goloshes.

Mrs. Perker restricted her answer to the simple word "Stuff," and seating herself on the solitary stereotyped hall chair, held up a number seven boot to be divested of its india-rubber envelope.

Mrs. Perker was undoubtedly ruffled, and the small servant-girl made a mental note to the effect that "Some one must 'ave been a-jumpin' on 'er corns." The fact was that the good lady only made excursions into the City at rare intervals, and this particular journey had been undertaken for the sole purpose of getting a certain brand of tea which Mrs. Perker was firmly persuaded could only be purchased at a particular shop in Gracechurch Street. This brand of tea, however, had for some reason or other, that day been unobtainable, and the good lady was consequently in a bad temper with herself and with every one else, on account of her long and fruitless jaunt. She had also taken a wrong 'bus, and her journey had in this way been much lengthened.

Having taken off her wet things, she proceeded to the dining-room, an un-

prepossessing looking apartment, severely furnished with that black, horsehair-covered furniture which always gives one the idea of a third-class waiting-room. Mrs. Perker threw upon the table the sheaf of small parcels with which her arms were burdened, and having given certain orders referring to tea to the serving-wench, she sat herself down on the least rigid-looking arm-chair close to the fender, and looked severely through her spectacles into the fire.

Mrs. Perker kept an "Educational Establishment for Young Ladies," and with the exception of two or three rooms which were retained for her own use, the whole house was devoted to the requirements of the Seminary. It was not a boarding school, however, so that no merry children's voices or girlish giggles broke the stillness of the dull winter's evening. The gentleman who had once occupied the position of husband to Mrs. Perker had been defunct for many years, but as their married life had lasted but a few months, the worthy schoolmistress had long since ceased to harbour any unavailing regrets on the matrimonial score.

Having warmed herself sufficiently before

the fire, Mrs. Perker thought that she might as well occupy the time until the tea was served by making a further examination of the things that she had bought in the City.

The first packet which came to her hand was the one whose disappearance had cost Josiah so much alarm. The somewhat uncouth manner in which the brown paper had been folded and tied up seemed to attract her attention, and Mrs. Perker turned it over once or twice in an inquiring manner before opening it. When at last she cut the string and the contents of the parcel lay exposed, the good lady's astonishment was extreme. The glittering flashes which the diamonds emitted as they caught the glow of the fire were so intensely bright that the packet looked as if it contained a sheaf of lambent flames. Mrs. Perker could hardly believe her eyes, and, stern matter-of-fact woman as she was, her fingers trembled with excitement as she turned over, one by one, the magnificent jewels which lay mixed up in such fabulous confusion. At first she thought they could not possibly be genuine, but noticing the rough and massive gold and silver settings which surrounded some

of the stones and the pieces of gold chain that hung to others, she began to have a faint idea of the immense value of the strange parcel which had so mysteriously come into her possession.

Being very short-sighted, she had not noticed Josiah's presence in the fancy-bazaar, and her parcels having got mixed up with his, she had taken up the packet of jewels in perfect unconsciousness of the fact. Any other but a strong-minded woman, such as Mrs. Perker was, would have been quite upset by such an adventure, and would perhaps have indulged in all sorts of day-dreams and aerial castles on the strength of such an El Dorado ; but the schoolmistress was none of these, and her precise, matter-of-fact nature at once told her that if the contents of the brown paper packet were really of the value which they appeared to represent, not many hours would elapse before the rightful owner would appear to claim them.

Mrs. Perker was nevertheless so much attracted by the jewels that, taking them off the table, she resumed her seat by the fire and began to examine in detail all

the beautiful gems which composed the glittering heap. She had barely time to scrutinize them all, when the front door bell was pulled twice in a spasmodic manner. The small servant ascended from the lower regions to answer the summons, and while she was occupied in unbarring and unbolting the hall door, Mrs. Perker composed herself to receive her visitors, whose errand she correctly divined.

Notwithstanding her apparent composure, the schoolmistress was not a little surprised when the maid-servant informed her that three men, one white, one black and the third brown, were asking to see her on pressing business. Mrs. Perker thereupon rose, and turning up the gas a little higher, ordered the girl to show her visitors in.

After a moment's hesitation in the hall, nudging and pushing each other to gain a little confidence, the three men appeared at the door of Mrs. Perker's dining-room. The very evident rigid respectability of the house had considerably abashed Sneat, and the ruffian was feeling very sorry that he had allowed himself to be dissuaded by Sam Bret from his original plan of effecting a

less ceremonious entrance into the school-mistress's premises.

Sneat came first, nervously twisting in his lean fingers the brim of his felt hat. Sam Bret, close behind him, cast his eyes for an instant at the lady who was sitting prim and stiff in her arm-chair, and then, his glance falling on the well-known brown packet, he had eyes for nothing else. Poor Josiah, in the background, seemed to be in a trance, appeared to be almost unconscious of his surroundings, and could with difficulty restrain his knees from shaking together. His fear culminated when Sneat, not knowing how to begin the interview, suddenly turned round, clutched him by one arm, and forcibly dragged him to the front rank, placing him straight before the unswerving gaze of Mrs. Perker. The brilliancy of the gaslight in the lady's dining-room dazzled the poor man's eyes after the gloom of the darkness outside, and so bewildered was he by finding himself in such a situation, that he hardly knew whether he was standing on his head or on his heels.

Mrs. Perker's notions with regard to

black and coloured men were very primitive, and her ideas in connection with them were mainly drawn from impressions given by accounts of Captain Cook's death in the Sandwich Islands, Stanley's African dwarfs and cannibals, with a strong dash of red Indian atrocities flavouring the whole. The worthy lady's intercourse with negroes had, in fact, been so restricted, that when she heard that one of her visitors was a black man, she had half expected to witness the entrance into her dining-room of an ebony-hued person wearing scarcely more clothes than are usually sported by the statues of antiquity. The first sight of Josiah's rotund figure, clad in a respectable suit of black dittoes, under a brown overcoat, made her suspect for a moment that Josiah was a sort of Christy Minstrel, who would presently produce a large set of bones, and ask idiotic questions of a certain "Massa Johnson." A glance at Josiah's thick lips and small black eyes, however, rapidly convinced her that she had to do with the genuine article, notwithstanding his apparent decency and abundance of clothes.

After a moment of oppressive silence,

Mrs. Perker in an uncompromising tone addressed herself to Sneat.

"You desire to speak with me on important business, I understand. Please be seated."

In answer to the lady's formal invitation, Sandy Sneat and Sam Bret sat themselves on two of the horsehair covered chairs, while Josiah nervously deposited his stout person on the extreme edge of the sofa, and being in considerable doubt as to what he was expected to do with his hat, finally located it in the fender.

Sneat shifted uneasily in response to Mrs. Perker's question, and turning to Josiah, blurted out:—

"'Ere Mr. Sampson, just you kindly tell the lady what we've come for. Speak up, Mr. Sampson," then fearing that the schoolmistress's suspicions would be aroused by the black man's very evident perturbation, he thought it wise to inform her that "the poor genelman is not in good 'ealth mum, and, I think, 'e feels the 'eat." Considering that Josiah's teeth were chattering with both fear and cold, this explanation did not carry much confidence with it. The negro was at his

wits' ends to know how to begin, and positively writhed under Mrs. Perker's unswerving eye.

The lady was beginning to realise that a great amount of responsibility had descended upon her through the possession of the jewels, and, being a woman of considerable intelligence, she had made up her mind to act very cautiously before surrendering them, and was resolved to satisfy herself completely as to the real claim of any one who should apply for them.

Josiah's evident nervousness, and the discomposed demeanour of the whole trio, struck her as being open to much suspicion, and Mrs. Perker set to work to cross-question the black man in a manner which would have done credit to a detective.

"I presume," she began in a thoroughly magisterial tone, "that you have called upon me with reference to a certain packet which has rather mysteriously come into my possession?"

"Ye-Yes," answered Josiah, shifting uneasily, and smoothing his round knees with his black hands.

"Well?" said the schoolmistress in a dry

tone, and as if expecting to be immediately placed in possession of all the facts of the case.

Our black friend appeared to be suddenly affected by a bad attack of bronchitis, necessitating the vigorous use of a large red handkerchief. He was so upset by the inquisitorial manner of the lady that he was unable to frame a single sentence explanatory of his business. Josiah, indeed, was so overcome, that he was once or twice on the very point of making a clean breast of the whole affair, but the sight of the jewels which lay there in front of him on the table, and fear of his two companions, nerved him to his task and restrained him from committing himself to the unpardonable act of folly which he felt sure would be bitterly revenged by Sneat and Sam Bret.

At last he gained sufficient presence of mind to be able to explain to Mrs. Perker the manner in which he lost the parcel of jewels, and taking courage from the sound of his own voice, he ventured to embroider a romantic little story relating how the jewels had been left to him as a legacy by

an old uncle in the West Indies, and how he had come over to England for the express purpose of having them reset and mounted in order that they might adorn the persons of the female members of his family.

At the conclusion of this little story, Mrs. Perker addressed to him two or three leading questions, which Josiah answered in a shifty and prevaricating way.

With great solemnity of manner, the lady then rose from her seat, and wrapping the jewels carefully in their original envelope, she placed the parcel on the seat of her arm-chair, concluding this operation by depositing her own person on the top of the packet.

Folding her hands and speaking in the tone of voice which a judge might use when condemning a man to the extreme penalty of the law, she informed her visitors that, considering the great value of the articles which had so strangely come into her possession, she did not consider herself justified in giving them up to the first persons who happened to call and claim them. She furthermore told them that it

was her intention to place the matter early next morning in the hands of the police, who, she felt sure, would spare no pains in weighing the claims of any person who addressed himself to them.

The words were scarcely out of her mouth, when Sneat, jumping up suddenly, threw himself on the unfortunate woman. Pressing his grimy hand over her mouth, he effectually stifled her first cry of alarm, and with the aid of a crocheted antimacassar, stripped off the back of the armchair, he gagged her so efficiently that Mrs. Perker's vocal efforts were reduced to ineffectual gurgles. Being a strong muscular woman, her struggles were so violent that it required all Sneat's strength to hold her down.

"Take the jewels, Bret! take the jewels from under 'er," he cried, sitting on Mrs. Perker's knees and holding down her hands.

In an instant, Bret dexterously drew out the packet from the place which the schoolmistress had thought so secure, and slipping it inside his coat, he darted to the door, leaving Sneat still struggling with Mrs. Perker.

Immediately guessing the mulatto's intention, Sneat extricated himself from the lady's grasp, and closely followed by Josiah, he rushed through the open door, in wild pursuit of his partner. Sam had just managed to get into the open hall, when the little servant girl, aroused by the unwonted sounds, appeared at the top of the stairs coming from the kitchen. In their frantic pursuit after Bret, Sneat and Josiah found their progress barred for an instant by the girl. With one brutal shove, the poor waiting-maid was sent spinning along the corridor, but the instant of obstruction had been sufficient to enable Sam Bret to open the hall door and dart out into the open pathway.

By the greatest luck, Jack Moresby at that instant arrived on the scene. He had been walking noiselessly along, peering into the surrounding gloom, and wondering whether he had not passed Laburnum Lodge, when he suddenly heard Mrs. Perker's door violently opened, and was nearly knocked down by his overseer's rush along the gravel path.

"Bret!" he exclaimed.

"Mr. Moresby!" answered Sam, stopping as short as he could, in his frantic rush. "Steady, sir, help me to knock the brute down! he's on us now, quick! here they come."

Moresby was too much astonished to speak, and there was not a moment for reflection. Almost at the same instant, there was a rush down the path, a man's form appeared, and standing a little on one side, Jack dealt him as he passed such a tremendous blow under the ear, that Sneat immediately stretched his length on the ground.

"Come along now, quick, sir. Come, for Heaven's sake, away from this. We needn't bother about Josiah," exclaimed Sam Bret, pulling the young planter's arm excitedly.

"But who is it? Who is it?" cried Jack suddenly awakening to a consciousness of his act.

"Only Sneat, sir! and I've got the diamonds! come quick, sir, or he'll begin to shout, and we shall be lost." Not waiting for his master's answer, Bret rushed away down the road, and quickly disappeared nto the obscurity.

Almost at the same moment, doors and windows were violently thrown open in Laburnum Lodge, and Mrs. Perker's voice made itself heard over a considerable part of the neighbourhood with such power and penetration, that the good lady seemed to be possessed of the lungs of a fog-horn.

"Murder — murder — robbery — help!" she shouted, and in a couple of seconds her vociferous solo was changed to a duet by the assistance of the small servant girl's high treble tones. The power and persistence of Mrs. Perker's shouts, left no doubt as to her being physically unharmed.

For a moment Jack was undecided and kept a close grasp on Sneat's throat. An instant's reflection, however, showed him that his present position was one of extreme danger, and abandoning himself to a natural impulse of self-protection, he flung Sneat away from him, and hastened with all speed in the direction taken by Sam Bret.

It was not a minute too soon, for the inhabitants of the houses in the immediate neighbourhood had been aroused from their slumbers. Windows were being opened in all directions, while heads, in many instances

garnished with curl papers, protruded from them, and inquired in shrill tones what was the cause of the disturbance. Mrs. Perker's agitated footsteps, indeed, might be distinguished hastening, with unwonted activity, down the garden path. In a few seconds, however, Jack was comparatively safe, owing to the conspicuous absence of any of the myrmidons of the law, and even Sandy Sneat had time to get up and disappear together with Josiah from the immediate vicinity before assistance arrived to Mrs. Perker.

CHAPTER X.

MEANWHILE, during the wanderings of the jewels, events had been succeeding each other apace on the other side of the ocean.

The answer that Violet had given Nettley at the Government House dance, half-hearted and reluctant though it was, had at once carried him to the seventh heaven of happiness. Dear old Mrs. Nettley, too, had been over-joyed at the sight of her boy's delight, and though slightly suspecting some of the reasons which had prompted Violet's answer, she was quite persuaded that no woman could long remain obdurate to the true love of such a generous, affectionate and good-hearted man as her son was. She had heard from certain persons who virtuously considered themselves in duty bound to let her know it, that Violet had shown a very marked

preference for the attentions offered by Jack Moresby, a fact which had been noticed by a good many people. She refused, however, to pay heed to their chatter, and Nettley's joy in his new-found happiness was too great to be shaken by any such trivial stories.

The Government House dance which had decided Violet's fate, had come off about six weeks after Jack's mysterious disappearance from Grenadilla, and as though fearing that some one might possibly attempt to rob him of his bride, Nettley had pleaded very hard that the wedding might take place at an early date. Mrs. Lee was, as we know, no less anxious than Nettley to see the marriage an accomplished fact. In the letter which Jack had written to Violet, and which Mrs. Lee had intercepted, he had stated that he hoped to return to Grenadilla by the next mail. He might consequently arrive in the island within two or three weeks after the receipt of that letter. His appearance on the scene would very probably overturn all the satisfactory arrangements which had cost Mrs. Lee so much trouble to bring about,

and Violet's mother was accordingly most anxious that the wedding should take place before Moresby could possibly arrive in Grenadilla.

Nettley had been as good as his word, and when he called at Belvoir the morning after the dance, to make a formal request for Violet's hand, he had given Mrs. Lee to understand that his wedding present to Violet would consist of a receipt in full for all the encumbrances which at present swamped Mrs. Lee's estate.

He left Violet entirely free to do what she liked with this paper, and would not offer the slightest objection to her making a present of it to her mother.

Violet was unable to adduce any valid reasons against an early date for the marriage, and now that she had irretrievably given her word, it mattered little to her whether the wedding took place a few weeks earlier or later. Jack's silence had almost convinced her that she had allowed herself to lay more stress on his words and manner to her than they warranted, and she often felt vexed at having allowed herself to think so much of him. Violet

bravely resolved to do her best to forget him entirely, but, despite all her good resolutions, the sight or sound of anything which reminded her of Jack never failed to call up from the depths of her heart a bitter, sweet sigh that would bring blood flushing to her cheek.

The day before the one fixed for the wedding, Nettley, wishing to give some final instructions connected with the ceremony, rode down to Williamtown after luncheon.

"Rockmount" was some seven or eight miles away from the small capital of the island, but Joe's spirits were high and his horse fresh, so that the distance was covered in a very short time. When he arrived at the pretty little church, which stood embowered in a grove of splendid palms, he was very pleased to see that the preparations for the morrow's service were being pushed on apace.

It was to be quite a grand wedding, and all the details which would tend to make the occurrence as festive as possible were to be provided. All the best people of the neighbourhood had been invited, and Violet,

having no male relative in the island, was to be given away by no less a person than His Excellency the Governor himself. Piles of palm-fronds, ferns, and beautiful white flowers of all sorts were being deposited at the church door and immediately taken possession of by three or four busy ladies, whose natty, tasteful fingers were transforming the interior of the church into a veritable bower of verdure and snowy blossoms. Nettley's extremely shy nature did not allow him to do more than cast a cursory glance into the interior of the building, and he quickly took refuge in the rector's vestry from the shower of light chaff and *plaisanterie* with which the decorating ladies hailed his appearance. The arrangements which he had to make with the clergyman were quickly concluded, and, after going round to some of the principal stores to give some final orders, Nettley made his way to the house of his most intimate friend, the man, in fact, who was to act as his principal support on the following day.

Notwithstanding his delight at the near approach of the day which would make

Violet his own, Joseph nevertheless looked forward to the ceremonious part of the morrow's proceedings with almost a comical amount of nervousness and dread, and his best man was obliged, when discussing the forms and details which would have to be attended to, to keep up his prospective bridegroom's spirits by numerous pegs.

At last the afternoon drew to a close, and although it was very little after five o'clock, it was already almost dark. The gloomy obscurity which was beginning to envelope everything was not, however, entirely due to the short twilight which precedes the tropical nights. The sky had become quite overcast, and the blue expanse, which a little while before had been so bright and clear, had now assumed a dull, heavy, leaden hue which seemed to take the colour out of everything, and to render every object, usually so bright and cheery, a shadowless mass of neutral tints. The distant hills loomed strangely clear, and it was evidently setting up for heavy rain.

"It's going to come down by bucketfuls," said Nettley's friend, as he saw him

mount his horse at the door, "I see you haven't got a coat; let me lend you mine, you'll be drenched to the skin—catch your death of cold, and that will never do, for I'm determined to see you safely right through the whole show."

"Oh, I'm all right," answered Joe, as he picked up the bridle and jumped on his horse; "little Firefly is going to put her best feet foremost, and we'll be up at Rockmount long before those clouds begin to break. For heaven's sake, old man, come up to-morrow morning as early as you can; I shall be in such a fearful state of fluster that I shan't be able to see about anything."

Firefly, impatient to be off, and probably scenting the approaching storm, did not wait for the answer, but broke off at once into a smart trot. In a few minutes they were out of the town and cantering along the high road towards the hills among which Rockmount was situated.

The leaden sky seemed to be getting darker and more black every minute, and in the ponderous stillness that reigned in the air, the sound of the mare's hoofs, as

she clattered along the road, rang out sharply, and with a clear metallic sound. Not a leaf was stirring, and the trees seemed to droop under the heavy weight of the atmosphere. Nettley, as he saw the well-known signs of threatening weather, began to regret that he had not accepted his friend's offer of the overcoat, and he looked around and behind him in the vain hope of seeing some comforting rift in the sullen-looking sky. Presently a large, tepid drop fell on his hand, and a moment later the monotonous patter of the descending rain sounded heavily on the leaves of the trees that bordered the road. Tightly buttoning his coat and turning up the collar, Nettley determined to make the best of it, and urged his horse to a still smarter pace. Darker and darker became the sky, and suddenly a terrible flash of lightning rent the black clouds in twain. The weird bluish light was so intensely bright, that for a moment Nettley thought he was blinded, and his mare was so startled by the vividness of the sudden flash that she came to a sudden stop and trembled in every limb. Crash came the

thundering peals, with a sound as if the black clouds were of granite and were crushing and grinding each other to powder.

Patting her on the neck, Nettley calmed the frightened animal, and bending their heads down before the rush of the wind which was beginning to blow violently, horse and rider pushed on towards home.

Down poured the rain in the unceasing torrents which are only seen in the tropics. The lightning flashed on all sides, and the heavy roll of the thunder almost unceasingly pealed from the heavens. It was almost a hurricane; trees, palms, and bamboos bent and cracked under the onslaught of the fierce gusts which blew in rapid succession, and it was often as much as Nettley and his horse could do to stand still under the furious rushes of wind which would meet them when turning corners.

It was now quite dark, and only when the bright flashes of lightning spasmodically lit up the streaming scene, was Nettley able to make out the road ahead of him. Once or twice he nearly lost his way,

but the unerring instinct of his panting horse kept him on the right road, almost despite himself. He was, of course, by this time drenched to the skin, but even had he wished to do so, there was not a single house or hut for several miles along that road, where he might have obtained shelter. He was, besides, very eager to get home, knowing that his mother would certainly be very anxious about his being out in such terrible weather.

Had the road been without obstacles, Nettley could have galloped almost the whole way, but at the foot of the hills, and about two miles from Rockmount, the track was cut by a small river. In dry weather, this stream was generally a little more than a mere brook, easily forded by man or beast. It had not even been considered necessary to span it by a bridge, but a sort of stone causeway, rising a couple of feet above the bed of the river, united the two sections of road and generally enabled travellers to pursue their journey dry shod. Grenadilla abounds in such rivers which, taking their source in the mountainous centre of the island, pursue their course through cañons,

valleys and lowlands, towards the sea. In the highlands, these little streams are merely rushing gurgling torrents, with miniature cataracts splashing snowy foam over the lace-like ferns which fringe the edge of the calm still pools in their course. They wind more calmly and sedately through the green cane-fields and cocoa patches in the lowlands. After heavy rain, however, these little streams, collecting huge quantities of water from the streaming hillsides, assume ten times their usual dimensions, and become turbulent torrents of seething clay-stained water, rolling great boulders in their course, and carrying everything before them.

Knowing this, Nettley was very eager to arrive at the causeway, and anxious to know whether he should still find it fordable.

Presently, notwithstanding the continual peals of thunder which crashed overhead, Joe's ear caught the sound of rushing water. Besides the ceaseless torrential downpour which acted like a curtain before his eyes, the pitchy darkness enveloping everything made it impossible for him to distinguish

even the road in front of him. Judging by the sound, however, he calculated that he was getting close to the river; a great blue flash of lightning suddenly lit up the scene for an instant, and Nettley managed to make out about ten yards ahead of him, a broad swiftly-rushing stream of dark brown water completely covering the causeway.

Between the rapidly recurring peals of thunder, he could distinguish the swish of the rolling stream, and he strained his eyes in an endeavour to make out the direction of the causeway. He knew it was covered, but calculating that there could not be more than six or seven inches of water passing over it, he had no hesitation in crossing, if only he could make out its direction.

Profiting by every succeeding flash of lightning, he managed to bring his mare to the edge of the water, and sniffing excitedly the brown torrent flowing past her feet, she snorted once or twice in alarm, and tried to turn round in the direction from which she had come.

"Whoa, mare; whoa, Firefly," said

Nettley, bringing her back to the edge of the water and waiting for the next flash. He was determined to cross if possible; there was no other way of reaching Rockmount, and the idea of returning and spending a night at Williamtown was out of the question. Joe knew that his mother would be terribly anxious if he did not return early, and he would not entertain for one moment the idea of spending the last night of his bachelorhood with any one but her.

Presently a particularly vivid flash enabled him to make out the white road on the other side of the river, and he at once determined to try and feel his way slowly across the causeway. Encouraging the mare by word and hand, Joe, after considerable trouble, induced her to put her feet in the water and to make a few steps in the right direction. The water at the edge being shallow gave the beast confidence, and after a few steps her hoofs struck against the cobble stones of which the causeway was built.

"All right, now; all right, old girl," said Joe, stroking the mare's neck as she sniffed

the brown water suspiciously and cautiously settled her feet. They were evidently on the right track, but the water was getting deeper at every step. "It must have rained very heavily up in the mountains for the river to have come down so suddenly," thought Joe, as he felt his mount tremble under the swift rush of the water, which was now almost over her knees. The lightning which flashed every now and then showed him that they were almost in mid-stream, but although the water might become even a few inches deeper, there would be but little danger, provided the mare kept to the causeway. Joe knew that it had no parapet nor other protection of that sort to prevent a horse from going over the edge, and when she once or twice stumbled and slid on the slippery stones, he shuddered, and the blood rushed up his back as he thought that she was losing her feet over the edge. Slowly and with quivering limbs, Firefly advanced step by step in the pitchy darkness, and Joe was calculating that they must be close to the opposite shore, when suddenly her legs seemed to be

struck violently by something like the trunk of a tree. The animal lost her foothold under the shock, and floundered. Her rider shouted and made a despairing effort to raise her with the bridle. The thick brown water seemed to rush down with renewed force, and in a second steed and rider disappeared over the edge of the causeway into the deep seething water. The lightning glared and lit up for an instant a white agonized face carried swiftly down the stream. The horse was gone, and the man's outstretched fingers despairingly clutched at the smooth stones as the swishing water rushed him along.

A forlorn cry, "Mother!" "Violet!" rang out in the distance among the rolling boulders, and the black angry river rushed on its furious way into the darkness.

It was past eleven, and in the drawing-room at Rockmount sat Mrs. Nettley. The snowy-haired old lady's eyes were vacantly fixed on the black darkness which could be seen through the window panes. On her lap lay a little book of pretty, homely prayers which her boy had given her on one of her birthdays, twenty years before,

when he was a quiet shy little fellow in knickerbockers. Yet, though she tried hard, she could not read the prayers, and her spectacles lay on the open leaves of the book.

The poor mother's heart was sorely anxious. She was filled with an unreasoning fear which she could not explain. It had begun to rain in the hills very shortly after Joe had left her to ride down to Williamtown, and it had poured in torrents ever since. Mrs. Nettley guessed that the river must have overflowed, and knowing that Joe would be unable to cross it, she had tried to conclude that he had gone back to the town, and would return home as soon as the bad weather abated. Such a thing had happened many times before, and her anxiety on those occasions had never been great; yet reason and argue with herself as she would, the old lady could not divest herself of a feeling of terror and a prescience of misfortune which filled her with dread. This was the night before his wedding, and she knew that her son would do all he could to be with her, and that nothing but impossibilities would

have prevented him from returning to Rockmount.

Laying her book on the table, the poor old lady paced up and down the room, every now and then peering through the windows into the pitchy darkness outside, as if trying to fathom the secrets of the night. Though the storm had not reached the proportions of those terrible hurricanes which now and then devastate the West Indies, yet the wind was terribly high, and sometimes above the moan of the tempest, Joe's mother could hear the crack of some palm or tree falling before the blast. It was a terrible night; but when, an hour before, Mrs. Nettley had expressed a wish to one of the servants that she might know whether the river at the causeway was still fordable or not, the man had instantly gone out and faced the storm, so as to bring back to the old lady the information she desired. Mrs. Nettley was idolized by all the people on her estate, and there was not a single native who would not willingly have gone through the worst dangers at her slightest bidding.

Presently the servant returned in a

thoroughly drenched condition, and was eagerly questioned by his mistress.

"Oh, de river come down too bad, ma'am," answered the man. "Massa Joe nebber able for cross um to-night; for sure, he must be gone back to Williamtown, ma'am."

"Are you sure, John? Do you really think so?" insisted the poor lady, taking the negro's assurance as a grain of comfort.

"Oh, sartin, ma'am, de river run strong, strong, and de rain falling like waterspout. No be anxious, my dear ma'am, Massa Joe be all right, and he come up early morning time. Better go to bed, ma'am. You go tire yourself too much, and to-morrow there be plenty to do."

But no: the old lady knew that sleep during her anxiety would be impossible, and then she persisted in thinking that her boy might possibly return home at any moment, notwithstanding the man's reports about the river, and he would want dry things, also something to eat and drink. Telling the man to go to bed, she resumed her book and tried to calm her persistent anxiety by reading aloud some of the

prayers. But after a few lines, her voice trembled, and suddenly, as if some mysterious spiritual message had reached her soul, the poor mother burst out sobbing. Throwing herself on her knees, she poured out an incoherent prayer to God for her darling son's safety. No printed prayers by the most eminent divines could be compared with the sobbing supplications of that poor old mother. Every word was wrung from her innermost heart, and the intangible, unconscious fears which tortured her soul, prompted her to pray and beg for mercy as fervently as if she had seen with her own eyes the terrible danger which had overwhelmed her child.

The housekeeper, hearing the old lady's sobs, came to her, and did all she could to comfort her, and to reason with her fears.

"Oh, Martin," cried the poor mother, pressing her hand to her heart, "I have a terrible presentiment that something fearful has happened to my darling boy! I feel it here. I question myself, and try to comfort myself with all sorts of hopes, but it's all of no use. Oh, my darling Joe, my poor boy!"

and the unhappy mother burst into an uncontrollable fit of sobbing.

Sometimes she would listen to her companion, a worthy soul, who had been with her for years, and appeared to take a little comfort from her words, but ever and anon her fears and presentiments would return doubly strong, and the poor old lady would cry out in an ânguish of anxiety.

Slowly and wearily the night wore on, and the dawn of the morning found the old lady still waiting in her drawing-room for the sound of those footsteps which she could never hear again. All through the night she had watched and prayed for her son's safe return, and, in spite of all the comforting words and arguments advanced by her housekeeper, the unhappy old lady's mind had become more and more impregnated with the terrible fear that some misfortune had overcome her only son. She could not tell what had befallen him, and yet she was utterly unable to restrain herself from giving vent to cries of the most intense grief, prompted by the thought that she would never see his face again.

At last when the faint dawn of a new day

began to light up the outlines of the great hills in the east, the old lady found herself quite unable to endure the terrible inactive anxiety which was consuming her. Messengers had been sent hours before to Williamtown, but none of them had yet returned, and the desire to obtain some sort of news as early as possible, prompted her to walk down the long avenue of bamboos which wound up the ascent to Rockmount. By walking in that direction she might hope to meet one of her messengers, and thus get news a few minutes earlier. Still the lonely avenue was quite deserted, and only the melodious quarrels of the little birds in the trees broke the serene silence of the morning. The rain had ceased for some hours, and the furious storm of the preceding night had calmed down into a gentle zephyr which scarcely stirred the fresh green leaves.

With trembling steps the old lady walked on, muttering almost incoherent prayers and supplications that her anxiety might after all prove to be groundless, and at every turn which the avenue took, she would look anxiously down through the

long vista of arching bamboos in the hope that she might see the dearly-loved form on horseback, hastening home to relieve all his mother's increasing fears.

Presently the road took a sharp bend, and the mother fancied that she could hear the sound of footsteps, and she bent her aged head eagerly forward in the effort to distinguish the reality of the sounds.

Yes, they were footsteps, and now and then she thought that she could make out the sound of voices. Eagerly the old lady hastened her anxious steps, and with eager bated breath, and outstretched hands she tried to catch the first sight of those whose coming she was so anxiously awaiting. Another turn of the road, and they were visible.

Four natives were walking slowly towards her, bearing on their shoulders a rough wooden frame, on which was laid a shapeless inanimate mass covered with a ghastly sheet, all stained and wet. As the men caught sight of the old lady, they stopped suddenly in trembling indecision, and almost unconsciously lowered their burden to the ground.

A heart-broken cry of motherly anguish rang in the peaceful morning air, and throwing her arms heavenwards, the unhappy mother fell swooning at the feet of her son's body.

CHAPTER XI.

'Tis mail-day in Grenadilla, and the club at Williamtown is full of its members waiting for their letters, while they cool their impatience with iced drinks.

The club is one of the best in the West Indies, and most of its members a very pleasant set of men. The house is on the quay, and the broad windows of the reading-room look on to the landing-stage and over the beautiful lake-like bay which forms the harbour of Grenadilla.

The Royal Mail steamers, however, only stop a couple of hours, and do not come into the harbour; so mails, passengers, and cargo come ashore in boats, punts and lighters. The wharf is teeming with a crowd in all shades, and the cool white clothes of European merchants' clerks contrast pleasantly with the brilliant gowns and coloured head-kerchiefs of the mulatto

women who sell cakes and fruit. The post-office is close by, and an eager crowd besieges its doors, impatiently waiting for the first signs of the delivery of letters.

The windows of the club are full of faces watching the boats as they come in, looking for new arrivals and criticising the passengers.

"By Jove! you fellows, have you seen this?" exclaims Long, of the bank, as he reads the News telegrams posted on the wall of the billiard room—"Passengers from Southampton—Mr. Maton, Mr. Moresby!—Moresby! Why, it must be Jack Moresby!"

"Must be," answered Temple, of the Treasury, coming from the window, "Fenchurch told me of it just now; can't understand it. Where has he been to all this time? It's like a resurrection."

"Wonderful! However, he must be all right, I suppose, and I shall be very glad to hear it, for Jack Moresby's a rattling good fellow. Just come back in time, too, for I heard yesterday that those fellows, what's their names, are making arrangements for taking possession of Palm Vale, in a day or two."

"Yes, remarkable reappearance," broke in Mr. Fenton, the bank-manager, "I had quite given him up as lost. I saw the overseer he had left in charge, the other day, and he told me that he had only received one letter from Moresby since he has been away, and that it simply said that he would be back very shortly, and that he left everything in his hands, relating to the arrangements of the plantation. The poor devil's had enough of it too," continued Mr. Jones, leisurely chalking his cue. "Baker and Tarbet's people have hardly left the place for the last month, taking inventories and making an infernal lot of preparations for the sale. I'm quite at my wits' end to know what Moresby's been up to, and can't understand his not writing."

"And what about that overseer of his; that coloured chap. He disappeared at the same time. What has he done with him?" asked Temple, looking again at the passenger list; "don't see him down here. However, we'll hear all about it directly. Is Moresby in one of those boats?" he asked, going up to one of the men standing at the window.

"No, haven't seen him yet. Hullo! there's the governor's barge back already. Whom did His Excellency go to meet?"

"The Governor of Trinadad is passing through from Barbadoes," answered Mr. Topman, the little attorney-general, who, when not under the large shadow of Mrs. Topman, was inclined to be rather pompous. "I presume he is bringing him ashore."

Very smart the barge looked as it turned the point which hid the mail steamer from view. The snow-white awning, plenty of light-blue paint and gilding, and the sun shining on the blades of the six pairs of oars, as they rhythmically rose from the water, made a bright picture. The Union Jack, with the arms of Grenadilla, flew at the stern and fluttered gaily in the breeze. It was quite a pretty little piece of colonial pageantry, and in a few minutes the smart pulling of the crew brought the barge up alongside of the steps.

"We had better go down and meet them," remarked Mr. Topman to the colonial treasurer as he led the way, "my wife met Lord Moretown in Devonshire last year."

"By Jove, there's Moresby! He's in the governor's barge!" exclaimed Long, leaning out of the window and waving his hand to Jack, who was delighted to see his good, cheery face again.

A moment later, Long and three or four others had made their way down to the wharf, and after shaking hands with the governor, were heartily greeting our young planter, and expressing their pleasure at seeing him back again in Grenadilla.

"I hope you fellows may pump the young rascal with more success than I have," laughed the governor, "he is as reticent as any colonial-office clerk about his doings during the last four months. I have a shrewd suspicion that he has been reviving the old buccaneering days, and has been away on some piratical expedition, for he has come back with gold galore, and I don't doubt, if you were to search him, that you would find his pocket-handkerchief is the black flag with the skull and cross-bones of a *Jolly Roger*. Ah! Moresby, if it ever comes out, I shall have to hang you up in chains on the highest point of Fort William," and Sir George turned away

laughing, with Lord Moretown, towards the carriage and pair of greys waiting to take them up to the Government House.

"Come along, Moresby, come up to the club and tell us all about your adventures," said Temple, catching hold of his arm and dragging him away from the others.

"Ah, Moresby, my dear fellow, where have you dropped from?" called out the colonial secretary, who was on horseback, and who had just ridden up at that moment. "I'm delighted to see you again," shaking hands with Jack cordially, "come up and dine; my wife will be awfully pleased to hear you've turned up again at last. I'll send the buggy down to the club for you in half-an-hour. Meantime, I'm off to get my letters."

"Oh, I'm awfully sorry," said Long, "I hoped you would dine with us, Moresby, at the club. All the fellows are deuced glad to hear you've come back. However, book it for to-morrow."

"No, next week, old chap," answered Jack, "thanks very much, but I must be off to Palm Vale to-morrow morning first thing. You can imagine how eager I am

to get back and look at the old place again. If you will lend me a nag, I'll be off by six."

"To-morrow morning at six, he'll start for Palm Vale," muttered a man who had been standing within earshot, eagerly listening to every word that fell from Jack's lips. "I'll have him on the road, the brute, and I'll take care I don't miss him!"

And the man scowled with eyes full of hatred, as Moresby was hurried away towards the club by a crowd of friends.

The man was dressed in a seedy-looking grey suit, with a black handkerchief loosely hanging round his lean throat. An old, broad-brimmed slouched hat was pulled well over his face, but, notwithstanding this precaution, if Jack's eyes had chanced to fall in his direction, he could hardly have failed to recognise the blackguard Sneat.

Up in the club, Jack was at once plied with offers of more drinks than he could have imbibed in a week, and he had hardly swallowed his first cocktail when little Mr. Topman opened the case with a leading question.

"Now, Moresby, tell us what you have

been doing since you left all so suddenly and mysteriously."

The attorney-general had only five minutes to spare before hurrying off homewards, and he knew it would never do for him to confront his worthy spouse with the news of Jack Moresby's reappearance and yet be unable to tell her the why and the wherefore of the whole case.

"Well, Mr. Topman," answered Jack rather slowly, and taking some trouble over the lighting of a cigar, "there's really very little to tell. I left rather suddenly, I know, but it was unavoidable. I've been home, and the cause which took me there was so satisfactory that you, and I'm sure all the other fellows here, will be glad to hear that I have been able to clear my estate to the last acre, and that my affairs are now in a thoroughly satisfactory condition. I'm devilish glad to be back, though, I assure you, and one can never imagine Grenadilla can be such a jolly little place, until you've been away from it for a while."

Mr. Topman left two or three minutes later dissatisfied, and the other men who

heard Jack's answer, at once took the hint, and wisely dropped all questions.

After dinner that evening at the colonial-secretary's, when the pineapple and the cashew nuts had been passed round, the hostess said, in her pretty way, to Jack—

"Now, Mr. Moresby, bring your coffee into the end gallery, and come and have a little quiet chat with me about something which I know has been on the tip of your tongue ever since you came into the house. Bob knows what we are going to talk about, so he'll stay here and finish his cigar."

Leading the way into a small, dimly-lighted, arbour-like verandah, at one corner of the house, Mrs. Tarleton sank gracefully into a long chair, overshadowed by the broad leaves of a fine palm, and then indicated to Jack a cosy wicker-chair by her side.

"Now I'm going to talk to you like a mother," said Mrs. Tarleton, and she tried to put on a mature and maternal expression, which was a distinct failure on her pretty, dimpled face.

"Don't make fun about it, please," said

Jack earnestly, and bringing his chair a little closer to hers, "you can't think how anxious I am about her. Do tell me quickly how is she? I hardly liked to ask those fellows at the club, you know, and all I could gather was, that they were still at Belvoir, but that they were in great trouble, for the mortgages are foreclosed, and the place is going to be taken away from them."

"She? They? The place? What she?—But no: I won't tease you," said his hostess, noticing the pained look on Jack's features. "I'll tell you all about it, for you are both great friends of mine, and I am awfully fond of Violet. Of course you heard of her engagement?"

"Engagement?" exclaimed Jack, rising from his chair in his pained surprise, and hastily putting down his cup of coffee. "Engagement, good God! what do you mean? To me, to whom? Surely you are not joking?"

"My dear fellow," she answered, "do be calm, and don't fly away like that. Do you mean to say you heard nothing about it? No; well, calm yourself, do, and don't get

into such a terrible state, for there is no need to. Sit still, and I will tell you all about it. In the first place, why did you not write to her?"

"Write! I did!" exclaimed Jack.

"Did you? well, I know she never received your letter."

"Good God!" was all that Jack could say.

"Well," resumed Mrs. Tarleton, "this is the whole story. I am a first-rate person to tell you, because Violet is my best friend. She has stayed with me several times, off and on, since you went away, and I am her only confidante. You can imagine how surprised she was, and indeed we all were, when we heard of your mysterious disappearance from Grenadilla, without the slightest word of warning. No one knew what to make of it. Violet was very anxious, and feared that you had met with a sudden death. All sorts of stories went afloat accounting for your disappearance. That old idiot, Smith, even hinted that you had tried to commit a burglary on his house, and had run away in consequence,"

"Oh!" indignantly exclaimed Jack.

"Yes, and lots of other absurd stories, which of course were not believed. And then came the reports that you had been seen in Trinidad and Barbadoes, and then that you had gone on to America. No one could make head or tail of the matter. Your overseer at Palm Vale apparently knew nothing about you, and I may tell you that Violet was rather hurt at not getting the smallest scrap of a letter. By the way, what has become of that coloured overseer who disappeared with you! Violet tells me that there is a young mulatto girl at Belvoir who is eagerly looking out for him."

"Oh, Sam Bret! a splendid fellow: I left him the other day in Barbadoes to look after a couple of nags which I bought there on my way through. He is a grand fellow, and I owe him more than I could tell you. I shall buy him a nice little plantation so that he can marry the mulatto girl as soon as he likes, if she is his choice. But do go on, please."

"Well, perhaps you did not know, any more than any of us did, that poor Mrs. Lee's place, Belvoir, was hopelessly mort-

gaged. Violet's mother appears to me to have been terribly unforeseeing, considering all things; and when the news came that the estate was to be taken away from her, she utterly collapsed, and being frail and delicate, Violet and the doctors feared that she would die under the blow. Then poor Nettley appeared on the scene.

"What Nettley?" interrupted Jack. "Joseph Nettley? Do you mean that fair-haired, fat fellow of Rockmount? Surely—"

"Yes, surely; a thoroughly good, kind-hearted, generous fellow, and devoted to his dear old mother. Well, it appears that he was madly in love with Violet——" here Jack gave vent to a half snort of indignation.

"He proposed to her two or three times, I believe; and at last, Violet, worried to death by her mother's prayers and supplications that she would accept him, finally did so."

"Did so. Do you mean to say she has accepted him?" exclaimed Jack vehemently, trembling with a variety of emotions.

"Yes," quickly answered Mrs. Tarleton, who, woman-like, could not quite resist

teasing and exciting him; but when she saw that he was going to break out into an incoherent torrent, she quickly added; "but don't worry yourself like that, my dear boy, I told you, just now, that it was all right, so just listen to me quietly. You seem to forget that you had never made any definite proposal to her yourself, and that she, like a good, well-regulated girl, was bound not to allow herself to think of you too much," and pretty Mrs. Tarleton's eyes sparkled with a funny little gleam. "I won't tell you, however, what Violet confided to me privately, for that would be a breach of confidence; but suffice it to say, that at last she gave way. It was understood that Nettley was to pay off the mortgages on Belvoir, if Violet would marry him, and the dear girl, at last seeing that it was apparently the only chance of saving her mother's life, Mrs. Lee being then very ill, she consented, and I think I know what it cost her to do so."

"Poor darling!" murmured Jack; "well, and then?"

"Then the wedding was arranged to come off very quickly: it was fixed for a day

about a month ago, and all was prepared. The day before the wedding, poor Nettley rode down from Rockmount to town, and on his way back was caught in a terrible storm and was drowned in trying to ford the causeway at the foot of the hills.

"Thank God," exclaimed Jack with an intense sigh of relief.

"Oh, how can you be so wicked!" said Mrs. Tarleton catching her breath.

"I beg your pardon," answered Jack, in a contrite tone. "But the relief was so intense! of course, I am awfully sorry for him, but all the same——"

"All the same, you forget his poor old mother, who simply idolized him. The dear old lady was broken-hearted, and her grief was too terrible. For a week after, Doctor Maclean quite gave her up, and when she recovered a little, she found she could not bear to remain in the place, so she went away by the last steamer to some relations in Scotland. Before she went, however, Mrs. Nettley settled on Violet, of whom she was very fond, five thousand pounds, and now wants to adopt her."

"You don't mean it," said Jack, "I am so sorry."

"Sorry; why, what do you mean?"

"Yes, I am sorry, Mrs. Tarleton," blurted out Jack, repressing himself no longer, "you can't think how I love her, and throughout the fearfully anxious time I've been having of late, my sole aim and object was to become rich so as to make her happy. I felt that she returned my love, although she had never said so, but words are not necessary for that. I know that she has not had a happy life, at all events during the past year, and I guessed that they were in difficulties; it was so delightful to me to think that now I am well off, and even, I may say, rich, I might go to her and give her, through my own efforts, all the comforts and pleasures in life that money can bring with it. Now that she has some money of her own, it isn't quite the same thing, and I can't help feeling a little sorry——"

"Oh, don't be a silly boy," answered Mrs. Tarleton. "Five thousand pounds is not very much; furthermore, she has already parted with it, for the dear, generous girl's

first act after getting the money was to make it over to the man who held some of the mortgages on Belvoir, so that her mother should no longer live in terror of being turned out of her old home. Violet is the sweetest, dearest girl in the world, and, besides, if she accepts you,—mind, I say if—well, I do not think it will be for your money. However, I must not say any more, or Violet would be very angry. Now finish your coffee and tell Bob to come and smoke his cigar out here."

"You cannot think what pleasure you have given me, my dear Mrs. Tarleton," said Jack rising and taking both her hands. "I've never felt so happy in my life, and the hours until to-morrow, when I can get away up to her, will feel like days."

"You are a rude boy to say that to me, and I think I shall just pack you off, away to your club at once, so that you can get away up to Belvoir before daybreak to-morrow. Bob!" exclaimed Mrs. Tarleton, unheeding Jack's protests, "come here, and take Mr. Moresby away. He has just had the gallantry to inform me that, in my company, the hours feel to him like days,"

and the pretty little woman gave a mischievous little pout.

"Your wife has told me something which makes me intensely happy, Tarleton," said Jack to the colonial secretary, as he came into the verandah. "I am sure she has been a true friend to me while I have been away, so I hope you will not mind her accepting, if she will, a small token of my deep gratitude to her," and Jack produced from his waistcoat-pocket a gold bangle in which was set a single magnificent diamond.

"Oh, how splendid! Bob, you don't mind do you?" appealed the little woman to her husband, as she slipped the bangle on to her wrist, her eyes sparkling as much as the diamonds.

"My dear fellow, it's too magnificent," protested the colonial secretary.

"And Violet will be quite jealous," whispered Mrs. Tarleton.

"Not at all," returned Jack. "You are such old friends of mine, that I do hope you will not pain me by refusing the trinket. I am not as I used to was," he continued laughing, "and I have come back

to Grenadilla with a good many of those sparkling stones. I came into possession, during my absence, among other things, of a large quantity of very fine diamonds, which belonged to my family, and which providentially came back into the hands of the rightful owner."

CHAPTER XII.

A PART of the road from Williamtown to Palm Vale is very picturesque but perilous in the extreme. For more than a mile the track is cut into the face of lofty and almost perpendicular cliffs. On one hand, great rollers from the Atlantic break up with a thunderous roar against the precipice fifty feet below, while on the other hand a sheer cliff rises almost straight upwards and in many places overhangs the rocky path. To those who are unaccustomed to such roads, a ride in this direction is apt to be more exciting than pleasant, but, owing to the sure-footedness of the Grenadillan ponies and to force of habit, most people who live in that district ride daily along that road without the slightest fear.

The path, although uneven and rugged, is generally broad enough to make the chances of falling over into the sea somewhat

remote, and the risk of such an eventuality, save with a shying horse, is very slight as compared with another danger which is much more imminent and likely to happen. Now and then small stones become loose on the top of the cliffs overhanging the path, and when, from some cause or other, they become dislodged, they frequently fall on the narrow road beneath. Even small pebbles falling from a great height present a terrible danger, and it has happened, before now, that natives walking along that road, in Grenadilla, have been struck dead or terribly injured by the sudden fall of these small stones.

On the morning following Jack's return to the island, this road was, as usual, almost deserted. It was past seven, and the labourers had already passed by on their way to work in the plantations. Now and then, however, a solitary native would walk along the track under the cliffs, and one of them noticed that two or three small stones and some gravel fell as he passed a certain spot. It was by no means extraordinary, quite the contrary in fact, and he went on his way without further attention.

Something was going on, however, near the top of the cliff, which was very unusual indeed. As soon as the first beams of daylight had appeared that morning on the horizon, a thin lank man in an old grey suit and a slouched hat had appeared walking along the sand on the top of the great cliffs. On arriving at the verge of the precipice which almost overhung the road, he had advanced very cautiously almost to the extreme edge, and had looked over on to the roadway beneath in a peculiar manner. Running his eye along the edge, he had seemed to be calculating something. He then sat on the grass, and pondered for awhile, and looked for an instant at the red morning sun, which was just peeping up behind a dark cloud on the horizon. His shifting eye then wandered again towards the edges of the cliff, and his attention seemed to be arrested by a large rounded boulder which jutted out a little over the precipice. He gave a grunt of apparent satisfaction as he surveyed it, and a gleam of revengeful hate shone in his beady black eyes.

Getting up from where he sat, he went along the top of the cliff until he reached

the boulder, and then he examined it carefully, and once more looked over on to the roadway beneath. In the cool grey air of the early morning, the stones and rugged ridges of the tract below had soft violet-pink tints, and the faint shadows cast by the slowly-rising sun, darkened and intensified the shades of the cracks and crevices below. One particular spot, like a small dab of white chalk, appeared to specially attract the man's eye, and he muttered, as he looked at it again, "Just there—damn him!"

Then he sat down behind the boulder, and with eager fingers began to tear the grass away from the base of it. The ground was soon bare, and he saw that it was all of loose earth and small stones. With hands and nails he scraped up the rubble and pitched the dirt away behind him. Now and then a small stone would escape him and would fall straight away down on to the rocky road below, and as his eager eye marked the spot where it fell, a smile of fiendish satisfaction would distort his mouth and he would return to his task with redoubled ardour.

In a short time all the small stones and

dirt around and under a part of the great boulder were cleared away, and it looked as if, in another instant, the big mass of ironstone would fall like an avalanche. Once the man pushed it, and the earth cracked around it, and a good deal of gravel fell into the road. "Curse it! I had nearly done for it," and he trembled lest it should fall too soon.

The sun was now well up, and the morning was growing into brighter day. From where he sat, just behind this great block of ironstone, Sneat could see a good distance of the road on either side, and his eyes scarcely moved for one moment from the turning in the path which would give him the first view of wayfarers coming towards him. But he waited and waited, and his long thin soiled fingers twitched with restrained impatience.

The man was consumed by hate and malignity, and when he had found himself outwitted by Sam Bret and Jack, and forced to take to his heels that night in London, leaving the packet of diamonds behind him, his rage had been terrible. He knew that he had lost the game, and cursed himself

scores of times for having been fooled by a simple mulatto. He had planned everything so well, he thought, and success seemed so assured. And all his efforts had been for nought, or worse than nought, for had he not, by his visit to the schoolmistress's house, helped to regain possession of the diamonds, only to snatch them out of the fire, so to speak, for the benefit of the man whom he hated now with a deadly hatred?

When he ran away that night under the alarm raised by the schoolmistress and her cries for the police which had awakened all Highbury, he had fled as fast as his legs could carry him from the scene of his failure. After a few hundred yards he had slackened his pace, and cursing the world in general, and anathematizing himself in villainous terms, he had bent his steps towards the lodging in the Tower Hamlets, in order to vent his rage and disappointment on the unfortunate Josiah. The unhappy negro suffered terribly at his hands, especially as Sam Bret was no longer there to protect him, and yet, in the midst of his trouble, it was some atom of

consolation to him to think that the hunt after the treasure was at last at an end. So utterly broken was the unhappy creature, that he did not even regret the money he had lost, and he was only anxious now to return again to Grenadilla before Jack could do so. He was determined to sell the little property he owned there, and then disappear with the proceeds to some other West Indian island where he might live untroubled by Jack, Sam Bret, or Sandy Sneat. Alas for his plans and projects! Sneat was not going to let him slip away from him, and to the unhappy Josiah's intense horror, Sandy informed him that he would return with him to Grenadilla.

"I've not settled my score with Moresby yet, and I owe something to that nigger swab, Bret. Besides, my friend Josiah, you and me's been too much pals over this 'ere blarned cursed biz to part like this. You're such a good willin' banker that I'm going to live with you always and make my 'ome with you. So, come along now, at once, and take tickets for the first steamer out to Grenadilla. Now no jibbin', or I'll 'ave

you in quod before the day's out, so no 'umbug!"

The unhappy man was thoroughly undone, and in Sneat's power. He did not know how much of his threat he could carry into effect, and feared that so long as he remained in England he would be entirely at the man's mercy. He was eager to get back to the West Indies, even at the cost of paying Sneat's passage a second time, for he would then be back in his own country, and could easily find a way there of evading the man who had made his life a burden to him.

They had both returned to Grenadilla about a fortnight before Jack Moresby did, and immediately the black man had found his foot once more on his native heath, he had regained courage, and his fear of Sneat and his threat had become very slight. He knew, however, that to live in Grenadilla after his late adventures, would be an impossibility, so, after a flying visit to his little plantation, he managed to elude Sneat, who still stuck to him like a leech, and disappeared to some other island, a poorer, and a more experienced man.

Sneat determined to remain in Grenadilla, at all events until Jack's return. His hate and longing for revenge had become a mania, and his days were spent in concocting plans of vengeance. Jack's words on the quay at Williamtown gave him an idea which he at once resolved to carry out. There was only one road up to Palm Vale from Williamtown, and Sneat knew every inch of it. His plan had entered his head all at once, and with all its details vividly worked out. The spot where the narrow road passed under the overhanging cliffs, presented him with an ideal plan for wreaking his hate and vengeance on his enemy, whose happiness and success he loathed to contemplate. It would be so easy; and better still, there would be no risk of detection. Moresby's death would be ascribed to a very natural and probable accident, and Sneat furthermore reflected, that as he would be the first on the scene of the catastrophe, he would be able to rifle undisturbed the pockets of his victim. It was more than probable that he would be carrying some of the diamonds which Sneat had looked upon so often as his own, and

the blackguard's eyes glistened with envious delight at the prospect of once more handling some of those sparkling gems.

It was now nearly eight o'clock, and yet there was no sign on the deserted road of the young planter. Was he never coming, and would the great stone topple over before he passed? The eyes of the wretch on the edge of the cliff grew dim with looking at the white road in the distance, and every now and again, a harsh-muttered curse would break from his lips and frighten the little grey lizards that lay basking in the sun.

"Ah, surely that is his prey at last—it is!"

Letting his pony pick its way over the rugged path, Jack gives himself up to the joyousness of his spirits. His heart is so light at the thought that in a few hours he will once more see Violet's sweet face, that he breaks out in a song like a pæan of joy and thankfulness.

Nearer and nearer he comes, and in a minute or less, he will have reached the white spot on the road. The man on the cliff spasmodically clears away a little more

of the rubble, and placing both hands against the trembling stone, he glares with the eyes of a tiger at his victim beneath.

"Now!"

A noise as of an earthquake! The crashing, tearing sound of an avalanche! A murky cloud of impenetrable dust, and an awful cry of human agony.

The cloud of dust clears away gradually; a ghastly mangled body lies in the road, half-buried in stones and blood-stained clay.

It is Sneat's; and Jack stands beside his pony, fifty yards farther on.

The wretch had miscalculated the fall of the great boulder which had been preceded by a hail of small stones and gravel. Jack knew the danger, his spurs were instantly plunged into the pony's sides, a great leap forward and they were out of danger.

The enormous mass of ironstone dislodged by the man above, had brought away a great piece of the cliff with it, and the fate which the unhappy creature intended for Jack, became his own.

CHAPTER XIII.

Every girl, at some time or other of her life, considers her existence a blank, and her happiness incomplete, if she be not the possessor of some cosy nook or private corner which she may look upon as her very own.

The lovely spot which Violet had appropriated as her own special bower, was a perfect ideal of what a young girl's favourite corner could be. It was on the banks of the pretty little stream which flowed in the valley behind Belvoir House, and as the ground was unsuited for sugar-cane or other cultivation, the privacy of the spot was never troubled by noisy labourers or shrill-voiced negresses. Over a great black polished rock in the background the crystal water of the stream came tumbling, like a miniature cascade, into the limpid depths of a deep clear pool which seemed

to check for an instant the noisy ardour of the little river. Great clumps of maidenhair and silver fern grew round the rippling edges of the pool, while overhead the delicate gently waving bamboos arched gracefully like huge feathers over the water, reflecting their light green leaves in the depths of the stream.

The banks, covered with moss and creeping ferns, rose up on either side somewhat steeply, and the little bend of the river formed rather a ravine than a valley, completely shutting away from view the noisy outer world. Besides being exquisitely cool, the little spot was always shaded in a dim reposeful light, and the restful chiaroscuro intensified the softness of the colours and deepened the transparence of the shades.

Violet loved the spot, and many hours did she spend there during the long weary days of Jack's absence. Many a time, when her patience was exhausted by Mrs. Lee's whimpering querulousness and her sister's disagreeable speeches, Violet would take refuge in her favourite nook, where the sound of the rippling water and the

twittering chatter of the birds overhead would speedily restore her peace of mind and give her courage to look more philosophically on her troubles.

With an open book on her knees, Violet sat on a great grey stone at the edge of the stream, gazing listlessly into the clear depths of the water. Her book was not the subject of her thoughts, nor did she notice the rapid gliding motions of the little brown fish as they darted in and out among the stones and pebbles.

At that moment, the clear limpid water was to her a mirror of unfathomable depth, and the picture in her eyes was the figure of a strong well-made young fellow riding on a dark bay mare, and his eyes were full of a strange light as they gazed into the face of his companion who was riding beside him. He was leaning over, and his hand was on her pony's neck, while she seemed again to hear a low voice, so full of passion, say, "Violet, my darling, I can't help it, I must speak."

It was but a phantom though, and all in an instant, a little sigh, which dropped from Violet's lips, seemed to break the

spell, and the picture vanished like a dream, leaving nought behind but the clear dark water reflecting the shadows cast by the tall bamboos

Violet's eyes then went back to her book, and her wavering attention tried to fix itself on the story—when, suddenly—there was a crackle of the dry underwood. The unwonted sound startled her, for she quickly raised her eyes.

"Violet," he said.

"Oh, Jack!" and in another second she was standing by him, her hands clasped by his, and his eyes drowning themselves in hers.

"May I, darling!" he whispered, as he raised her soft rosy lips to his. And he did—many times.

"Oh, Jack! where have you been all this time?" at last she said.

"To fetch you these, my dearest love," said he, and, taking from his pocket a dazzling collar of exquisite diamonds, he clasped it round her fair white throat.

* * * * *

And a few weeks later, the little church under the tall palmistes was decorated once

more with snowy blossoms and tender ferns, and there was a more beautiful wedding than had ever before been seen in Grenadilla. And his Excellency the Governor gave away the lovely bride, the magnificence of whose diamonds will long be remembered in the island. Mrs. Lee, exquisitely dressed as a *belle maman* of recognised elegance, shed a few gentle tears of happiness, of pride, and of half-a-dozen other emotions which she would have been utterly unable to analyse.

Every one, of course, was there. A fair bevy of bridesmaids recruited from the ranks of the Government House non-descript, and extremely happy with the diamond brooches presented to them by the bridegroom.

Mrs. Topman, in black satin of great magnificence, with the Attorney-General somewhere in the background.

The Colonial Secretary's pretty wife, perfectly happy and smiling at every one. The Chief Justice and his Lady, good ponderous *pièces de résistance*, and in fact every one who was any one in Grenadilla.

Honest Sam Bret too is there, of course,

and his big black eyes and his dark brown cheeks glow with pleasure. He will be married next week to the girl of his choice, and Jack Moresby's gratitude to him has been so substantially expressed, that he is a made man for life, while his three months' chase after the diamonds was as good as a liberal education to him.

The bridegroom, though it is not the rule to mention him at a wedding, was there as a matter of course, and, for a bridegroom, looked and felt intensely happy.

Many and varied were the comments made in Grenadilla on Jack's sudden re-appearance, and all sorts of surmises were made to account for his strange absence.

The whole matter, however, was a mystery to the worthy Island folks, and in fact it still remains one. The only person who, if wished to, "could a strange tale unfold," is Josiah, and he would rather face a herd of wild bulls than place himself within reach of Jack. The unfortunate black is now keeping a peddling little shop in a bush village at Trinidad, where he does his best by fleecing his more simple

neighbours, to recoup himself for all he lost during those terrible three months when he went out to see the world.

Jack and Violet, like sensible people, spent the first part of the honeymoon at Palm Vale, and then went "Home" for a long and delightful trip. They live an ideally happy life; usually spending six months among the gaieties of Europe, and then, when the cold winds of October begin to blow, they return to the lovely old home of Jack's fathers, and spend the dismal months of winter under the blue skies, and among the roses and butterflies of the Isles of the West.

THE END.

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